REAL WESTERN

Magazine

15¢

April

TED
ALIVE

000
WARD

"FIGHTING HORSE VALLEY"
COMPLETE
75,000 WORD
NOVEL
by WILL JENKINS

Also
Wm. MacLEOD RAINE

SHORT STORIES
by
IRA MULLINAX
RAY PORTER

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PORTRAIT RING CO.
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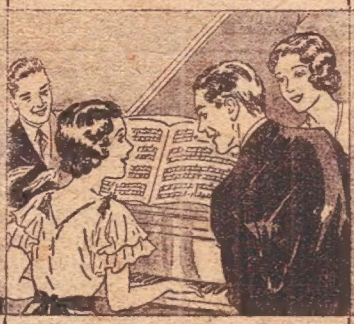
APR, 1936 VOL. 2- NO.4

At parties everyone seemed to be able to add to the fun, while I was just a wallflower.

I received fewer and fewer invitations. Only long, dreary evenings seemed to be in store for me.

Then one day I read about a new way to learn music that had made popular musicians of thousands.

The Free Demonstration Lesson proved that this way of learning music was easy as A-B-C. Real fun, too!



Then came Janet's party. All were flabbergasted when I offered to play . . . and actually did!

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REAL WESTERN Magazine

Yearly Subscription—75 cents April, 1936, Issue

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Chet Holliday rode into a mess of trouble when he rode into Fighting Horse Valley. For reasons he could not fathom, men hated him, dry gulchers shot at his back, his pal and his sweetheart were kidnaped. Chet put aside his conflict with the wild horse, Typhoon, and buckled on his six-shooter. With the residents of the sleepy town of Alminas scurrying for cover, Chet blasted his way with smoking guns, and Typhoon's killing hoofs, into the midst of as thrilling and compelling a battle as has ever been written about the "gun-slinging West."

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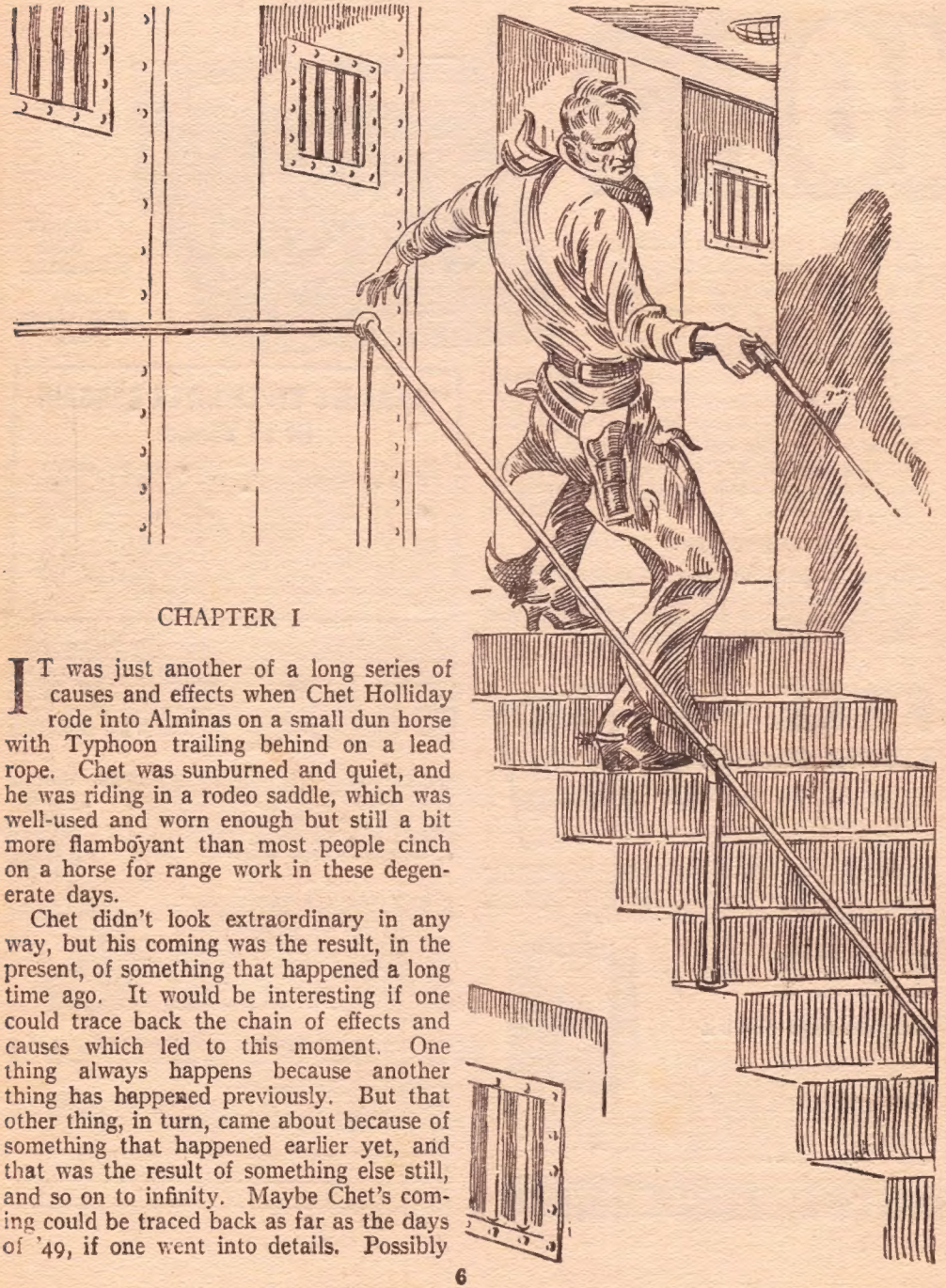
Fighting Horse Valley



CHAPTER I

IT was just another of a long series of causes and effects when Chet Holliday rode into Alminas on a small dun horse with Typhoon trailing behind on a lead rope. Chet was sunburned and quiet, and he was riding in a rodeo saddle, which was well-used and worn enough but still a bit more flamboyant than most people cinch on a horse for range work in these degenerate days.

Chet didn't look extraordinary in any way, but his coming was the result, in the present, of something that happened a long time ago. It would be interesting if one could trace back the chain of effects and causes which led to this moment. One thing always happens because another thing has happened previously. But that other thing, in turn, came about because of something that happened earlier yet, and that was the result of something else still, and so on to infinity. Maybe Chet's coming could be traced back as far as the days of '49, if one went into details. Possibly

A Complete 75,000 Word Novel

By Will Jenkins

(Author of "The Outlaw Sheriff")

even as far back as the discovery of America.

But that is guesswork. It is certain that the trail of Chet's horses going into Alminas could be traced back twenty whole years to a dynamite explosion of which Chet knew nothing at all. Twenty years of trivial happenings that nudged the course of human events this way, and sheered it that, to result in Chet's riding into town with one idea and one dream in his mind, and an outlaw pony trailing him at the end of a lead-rope.

The ancient explosion was now forgotten. No more than two men ever took note when it happened twenty years ago. It was just a dull, cavernous reverberation that went echoing interminably through the moonlight about Alminas. Then the mouth of a little, deserted mine-drift going into a mountain-flank shivered and collapsed, and so sealed itself forever. And nobody noticed except the two men who were nearby.

One of them sobbed, suddenly, and put spurs to his horse and rode away through the moonlight like a madman. The other remained behind to attend to two horses discreetly tethered among some saplings. The echoes died away and the man who'd

stayed went over to those horses. They shied, but he unsaddled them and removed their bridles. Then he lashed them so they ran away. In course of time they would probably drift homeward. That did not matter. The important thing was that they left this place where dynamite fumes drifted lazily up from among a monstrous mass of broken stone.

The man who stayed behind took the two saddles—one of them was a woman's—and dropped them down a deep crevice in the hillside. Nobody would ever look there for them or for anything else. Then he looked meditatively about him. Nothing more to do. He whistled soundlessly as he moved off.

That was all that happened, twenty years ago. But there were consequences of the event, nevertheless. They seemed trivial. Then those consequences had other consequences, which seemed more trivial still. And the chain of consequences went on and on, until one day Chet Holliday rode into Alminas as the direct result of them all.

His arrival created no stir whatever. Eyes turned rather to Typhoon, who was a fine figure of a horse with no saddle-marks on him. Only one man really paid any attention to Chet. But he looked dreamily, recognized Chet, and stared hard. Then he nodded profoundly to himself and said in a tone of deep conviction:

"It's Fate! Yes, suh! Now somethin's goin' to happen. It's Fate!"

But that man did not speak for the public. He was only Jake Henniger, lowliest and least-considered white man in the Fighting Horse Valley. Because he not only lived with but was legally married to a Mexican *peon* woman and so far admitted his relationship to her children as to chastise them upon occasion. Therefore he was lowest of the low, and it was considered appropriate that he should spend most of his time dreaming dreams on a tattered goatskin across the doorstep of his shack.

Chet rode purposefully past the general store—and as though by some instinct found the livery stable.

CHET put up his two animals, giving fair warning about Typhoon. He was to be treated with respect. Otherwise he'd enforce it. The dun horse was well broken and trained. And then Chet went to the office of the County Clerk and submitted a document for recording. It was pocket-worn and tattered. There were other papers to be recorded with it. The whole would take time, an hour perhaps.

Chet nodded, put down the fees, and went out. He stood and rolled himself a cigarette on the clerk's doorstep, surveying the town. He nodded again. Changed. Changed a lot. He'd run away from here when he was fourteen. There probably wouldn't be a soul in town who'd remember him. He walked along the street.

The drowsy, humming quietude of a small town filled the air. A dog sat up, scratched somnolently at an especially irritating flea, and relaxed with a sigh to slumber again. The Alminas Café loomed up with a plate-glass window in its front and an aroma of ham and egg. Chet turned in.

A waitress took his order. Chet waited, and the waitress ignored him. Presently he drawled:

"Uh—ma'm, I'm lookin' for some folks I used to live with 'round heah. Name of Hanks. Ever hear of 'em, ma'm?"

"I'm afraid not," said the waitress, with extreme reserve.

She went through swinging doors, came back with a tray on which Chet's order rested, and set it before him.

Chet shrugged. His eyes roved. A one-story office opposite. Plate-glass windows, double-wide and elaborately curtained. On the glass: JULIAN DE AVIGUEZ, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW. Chet was searching his memory for the name when two horsemen clattered to a stop before it. Horseman-like, Chet sized up the two animals first.

Then he grunted suddenly. One of the men was Buck Enderby. Down here in Alminas! Chet half-rose from his seat. Then Buck headed across. He was aiming straight for the Alminas Café. He brushed dust off his neckerchief. Surreptitiously, he changed the tilt of his hat. And Chet's eyes rolled to the waitress. He shifted in his seat and watched as Buck came in and greeted her tenderly.

Chet grunted again. Buck turned, scowling, and saw Chet grinning at him. He stared for an instant. Then—

"You mangy son-of-a-gun!" gasped Buck. "When'd you blow in? What you doin'?"

Chet motioned to a place beside him.

"Just came," he observed. "Set an' eat.

Bought a mine down this way with rodeo money. Came along to look it over. I got Typhoon with me."

"That wild yellow horse? Lord A'mighty, Chet! Ain't he killed anybody yet?"

"Nope. He's halterbroke now. He ain't mean. Dam' good horse." Chet waved his fork. "Over in the livery stable now."

"You goin' to ride for the JW," said Buck firmly. "Wallace's in town now. He owns it. I rode in with him. I'll tell him about you an' he'll make a place for yuh."

He sat down with Chet, to burst into enthusiastic reminiscences. He and Chet had worked together two whole years on the Crazy D. That was when Chet was just getting into real form. He broke all the remuda for the Crazy D two years in succession, and then won third-money at the Deadwood Rodeo. The prize was big money to him, and he took it seriously and set to work really to learn how to ride. He was second man at Deadwood the next year and first at two smaller rodeos. This year past he'd taken first money every place he rode; and he'd spent most of his prize-money buying Typhoon, the horse he was the only man ever to stay on for the prescribed three minutes.

"What you goin' to do with that horse?" demanded Buck. "He's plain poison, Chet! You ain't figurin'—"

"He's a dam' good horse," repeated Chet. "You look him over sometime. I made right much this rodeo season. I bought him, an' then I bought a mine. Right in this valley."

BUCK shook his head.

"Loco," he said commiseratingly. "Plumb loco! Theah plenty of holes in the ground around. One of 'em's on the JW. They' all worthless. How come you stuck yourself?"

"This one was dug twenty years ago," Chet told him. "Low-grade ore. They couldn't break even runnin' it."

"Then what in hell—"

"Gold's gone up to thirty-five dollars an ounce," said Chet. "Then it was twenty. Lots o' folks makin' out on mines that wouldn't pay before."

"Umph! It just ain't practical, Chet! You let me get you a job on the JW. Wallace's a good man to work for. He's a *buen hombre*."

Chet shook his head. Wallace? He remembered, suddenly. A tall man on a big horse. Cold gray eyes, which had ignored a dark-haired small boy in a squatter's tow-headed brood.

"I remember him, Buck," said Chet. "But I got my plans kinda made. I want to find some folks named Hanks. They raised me without anybody payin' my board. I owe 'em somethin'. I'm goin' to look 'em up. Sure you don't know 'em?"

Buck shook his head once more. A movement drew his eyes across the street. A tall man with white hair was coming out of the office of Julian de Aviguez, attorney-at-law. He looked about him, and Buck got up. Chet rose too, and paid for his meal while Buck said:

"Theah's Wallace now. I'm ridin' back with him. I'll ask him if he knows the Hanks. An' in spite of you, Chet, I'm going to say somethin' about a job. It'll come in handy when y'go broke."

He nodded abstractedly to the waitress. Chet watched him cross the roadway and saw the friendly nod with which Wallace greeted him as they mounted. Chet was just coming out of the café when Wallace jerked his head around and saw him.

The two men were perhaps sixty feet apart on opposite sides of the street. Chet saw Wallace's eyes fasten upon him from his seat in the saddle. He noted that Wallace was a lot older than his memory of him. Then he saw Wallace go slowly white, while his eyes burned with something that looked like pure and unadulterated hatred. There was rage there, too, and a passionate hate, like that of a man stabbed past recovery, who can think only of striking back.

Wallace said something curt and bitter. He used his spurs and shot away, not glancing at Chet again. Buck turned blankly to Chet. He shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands, in dumb-show explaining alike the absence of all information concerning the Hanks and his bewilderment at Wallace's rage. Then he, too, set off at a run to catch up with his employer.

Chet shrugged in his turn, though he was frowning. He didn't understand it at all. He went back to the clerk's office and found that not even a beginning had been made in the copying of his documents into the registry-books. He mildly suggested haste, and got it. He went to the livery-stable and found his dun horse contentedly

eating. He went to the stall where Typhoon was stabled, and saw to it that that noncommittal animal was comfortable.

He went out of the stall-alley and saw a girl in the act of mounting before the livery-stable door. His eyes flicked uninterestedly past her, and then returned and clung. Then he changed color. The liveryman jerked a thumb at him and the girl turned her head.

"Howdo!" she said, and smiled. "I was looking at your horse. Why!—"

"Yes, ma'm," said Chet. "That's Typhoon. I—uh—I bought him after the rodeo. I—uh—like him."

The girl's smile deepened. She put out a small brown hand.

"I rooted for you, and I saw you win. Now I'm gladder than ever! He is too good a horse to—to—"

"Yes, ma'm," said Chet uncomfortably. "He fought game, an' as fair as a horse could know how to fight. We' still fightin', but he'll get friendly one o' these days. He ain't a natural outlaw."

She nodded.

"I've thought of him," she said. "I hated the idea of his being shipped around from rodeo to rodeo, just for men to try to conquer. He's too good for that. I'm glad you won and got him."

SHE smiled again and whirled her horse about and was gone. Chet stood still. He even rolled a cigarette, showing no sign of disturbance. But he'd ridden into Alminas with an idea and a dream in his mind, and she was more or less the dream. He'd seen her just once before. That was the last day of the Deadwood rodeo, about half an hour before he went into ride Typhoon. Back of the corrals. He'd been mooning about there, struggling to get back some kind of confidence in himself. He was up among the top riders, but the going was hard. He'd almost pulled leather only the day before. And he'd drawn Typhoon, the one horse in the rodeo no living man had ever ridden for three minutes straight. This girl was back there, too. She wasn't riding, but she knew horses. They'd talked, she cheerfully, he somewhat gloomily. And she had put new spirit into him somehow. Smiling, she'd promised to root for him, and went back into the stands. And when he went out of the chute on Typhoon like a man on top of a hurricane, somehow he had confidence and skill, and a new competence. He not only stayed on Typhoon, but he rode him. And he'd never really expected to see that girl again.

Now he puffed on his newly-rolled cigarette and said detachedly:

"Uh—who was the lady? I saw her up at Deadwood, an' she sure knows horses."

"She'd ought to," said the liveryman. "Lives on the JW with her uncle. Wallace. Maybe you' heard o' him. She's Miss Carol Bradley."

"I' heard o' Wallace," said Chet negligently.

He asked again about the Hanks. It seemed to the liveryman that there were some boys named Hanks that'd got into trouble not long ago. Maybe Jake Henniger would know. He knew most all the squatters.

He directed Chet. And Chet went to see the lowliest white man in Alminas and got explicit directions to the house of the Hanks family. They were squatters. Two of the boys were in jail. They'd been chased away from their last location and would probably be chased away from their present place before long. And wasn't Chet's last name Holliday? His face looked kinda familiar. Chet admitted it and listened politely to much pointless talk.

Because of that listening he failed to see Buck when he came back in town and delivered a note to the office of Julian de Aviguez, attorney-at-law. Buck gazed anxiously around as he rode into town and out again.

When Chet finally tore loose, he went to the clerk's office. Everything was finished. Then back to the livery-stable. Somebody with a Sheriff's badge on his vest stood in the wide front door, talking comfortably with the liveryman. He talked leisurely while Chet saddled up and came out with his two animals. The liveryman introduced him. The Sheriff of Alminas.

"Howdo, suh," said Chet mildly. He fumbled in his pocket to pay the livery-stable fee.

"Going on, Mr. Holliday, or staying around a while?" asked the Sheriff genially.

"Stickin' around for the present," said Chet.

The Sheriff coughed.

"We've got a right healthy climate," he observed, "when somebody's used to it.

But it don't agree good with strangers."

Chet's head jerked around. He saw blank inquiry on the liveryman's face. Chet stared steadily at the Sheriff.

"What's that, suh?" he asked. "A hint? D'you mind explainin' it?"

"It's not a hint," said the Sheriff. "It's a warning. You're not wanted. I'm willing to be obliging, though. If you've got business around here for a couple of days, all right, but—"

"Obligin'? I'd be obliged, suh," said Chet gently, "if you'd go all the way to hell. I'm stayin' as long as I dam' well please an' leavin' not before. An' if you don't like it—"

The Sheriff swelled and scowled. His hand moved threateningly to a holster beneath his coat.

And Chet simply looked at him. Detachedly. And it suddenly occurred to the Sheriff that Chet's gun was slung quite low, and that he didn't reach for it because he knew he could wait for the Sheriff to start to pull a gun and still beat him to the draw.

The Sheriff hastily straightened his arm.

"I'm giving you fair warning," he said harshly. "You're not wanted! You'd better get out of town and stay out!"

He turned on his heel and walked rather swiftly away.

Chet gazed after him perplexedly. This made three things that didn't make sense. Wallace's evident hatred. Jake Henniger's babble. And now the Sheriff's warning him to leave town.

CHAPTER II

IT was almost sundown when he found the place he was looking for. It wasn't the shack the Hanks had lived in when he ran wild with their brood. No. They'd been chased out of that. This was another they had accumulated—and "accumulated" was the only word to express it. It was patched together. It was ramshackle. There was an elegant shiftlessness visible everywhere, from the utterly barren earth in an irregular space about it to a sidewall plank that had come loose from its nailing and remained that way. And not only shiftlessness, but stark poverty characterized the dwelling.

Chet felt himself wincing. A small boy appeared, wriggling from under the house. He regarded Chet suspiciously.

"Howdo," said Chet somberly. "Is Mistuh Hanks home?"

The suspicion with which the boy regarded him deepened. He looked furtively sidewise and dived suddenly around the corner of the house, bawling, *"Lisbeth! Lisbeth! Somebody's heah after pa!"* He seemed to get an answer and came cautiously back, remaining at a place from which flight was possible.

There was a cautious movement inside the house. Footsteps. The front door squeaked open. 'Bijah Hanks came out and moved slowly toward Chet.

"Howdo, suh," said Chet, unsmiling. "I left in right much of a hurry an' with a lot of hard feelin's, bein' a kid. I came by to say I'm sorry."

He saw Hanks clearly, now, and 'Bijah Hanks had aged. He was remarkably unlike the giant who had been at once protector and ogre to Chet in years gone by.

"Howdy, Chet," said 'Bijah. He grinned feebly. "I swear I thought you was your pa settin' up on that horse. Will y'come in an' set? We—we in right bad shape just now, but I reg'n we can scare up some grub for yuh."

Chet got down. With a queer surprise he found that he topped Hanks by half a head. He saw him differently now, too. He saw the poverty that had beset Hanks all his life. Suddenly the squatter's generosity to a friendless small boy loomed large. Without really enough to eat himself, he had fed a stranger.

Chet had run away, hating 'Bijah Hanks poisonously. Now he was ashamed. The cadaverous leanness of Hanks, and his slack and listless air, somehow seemed pathetic. And Chet, well-fed and comfortable, felt that maybe a part of Hanks' stooped thinness came from sparing extra food for him. He made a sudden decision.

"I was wonderin' if I could board with you a while, suh," he said slowly. "I'm able to stan' my share of keepin' the house, an' maybe a little more."

"You c'n stay, Chet. Sure!" 'Bijah Hanks straightened up. "We had our fusses, but we share what we got with our friends, anyways."

"All right, suh." Chet nodded to the small boy. "Wheah's the corral?"

"Hit's busted," said that person capably.

"Well, then," said Chet, "I guess us two'll have to fix it up so these horses'll stay put. You ought to get about a quar-

ter's worth o' hard labor done before it's real dark. But leave that yellow horse alone, fella! He's an outlaw. He's poison! Now you an' me, let's get to work."

He fished in his pocket and thrust a wad of bills in Hanks' hand.

"On account o' board, suh," he said in a low tone, and went on with the small boy.

With his animals tethered for the moment, Chet worked to shift the flimsy fence so they would be safe for the night. It was hard work, but the small boy labored manfully. He plied Chet with eager questions. Chet answered them. He asked questions in his turn. He learned much. Sam and Dick were in jail. They were the oldest boys, but little younger than Chet himself. He remembered them well enough. Pa got out of jail just a little while back. They'd been havin' a lotta trouble. The Sheriff, he'd done told them to git outa Fighting Horse Valley.

"He's got a habit that way," commented Chet. "He ordered me out today, too."

"You' goin'?" Disappointment was in the question.

"No," said Chet drily. "Are you?"

"We cain't," the boy explained. "Pa, he hadda sell our hawss to pay his fine when Sam an' Dick were a'ready in jail. So we ain't got any way to go."

Chet took the heavy labor on himself. For half an hour more he worked. Then it was too dark to see. He made the circuit of the corral, though, and then turned the two horses in.

SMELLS smote his nostrils as he entered the house. Food, and coffee, and a trace of whisky. 'Bijah Hanks sat at ease in the kitchen, beaming, with an open bottle by his elbow.

"Heah y'are, Chet," he said happily. "I sent Lisbeth over to a neighbor an' got some store grub an' this bottle so's we could make a celebration of your comin' home."

He poured a monstrous drink for Chet and forced it upon him. Lisbeth came in from the next room. She smiled at Chet.

"My gosh!" said Chet. "You' grown up too, Lisbeth! All grown up an' a lady! You must be all o' sixteen now."

"Seventeen," said Lisbeth quickly. "I'm glad you' back, Chet."

She stood a moment in the dim lamplight for him to see her. Lisbeth was blonde, as were all the Hanks, but her eyes were darkest brown. They made a startling effect beneath her pale hair. Her pose showed her figure rounded and full. She was pretty.

"I cooked supper," she told him consciously. "I'm keepin' house for pa now. It's all ready. Set an' eat, Chet."

Chet put down his drink untouched. The meal began. And every evidence of poverty hurt, because he felt he'd contributed to it. There was 'Bijah Hanks' new expansiveness. He pressed food upon Chet. There was grub in the pantry. There'd be more as soon as he got around to buying it. Hanks was inclined to swagger because of his new prosperity and Chet winced because it was so long delayed. Lisbeth watched him. He felt her dark eyes fixed upon his face. Furtively, she tugged at the shapeless dress she wore, to emphasize the shapeliness beneath.

"Wheah's Sam an' Dick?" Chet demanded abruptly. "Tommy said they were in jail. What's the matter?"

'Bijah Hanks fell into the hopeless, whining tone of his type.

"It's the Sheriff, Chet. An' Mistuh de Aviguez. A poor man ain't got a chance, these days."

"What happened?"

"You know how the boys always liked to roam around. They was up in the hills on the JW an' one of 'em seen somethin' down in a deep cleft in some rocks. It was old leather, Chet, moldy an' no-account to anybody. They poked it out an' it was a saddle one time. The boys figured it might be a old Spanish saddle. They looked the saddle over, an' it was all rotted, but theah was some fittin's still stickin' to it. They rubbed 'em, an' they shone like silver. Stirrups, an' fancy nails, an' so on. So they poked some more an' got out another saddle, or what was lef' of it. 'Was a woman's saddle, one of 'em. An' they brought 'em down to Alminas. An' they was silver. The boys sold 'em. But the Sheriff—why—nex' day he an' Mistuh de Aviguez come around an' swore the boys had stole 'em! They raised hell about those saddle-fittin's, Chet!"

Chet asked questions, acutely aware of Lisbeth's dark eyes fixed upon him. The Sheriff had been watching the Hanks ever since.

'Bijah whined on, complaining of persecution.

"Ef it wasn't for Miss Carol Bradley,

we'd ha' starved! Nobody don't care nothin' about poor folks."

"But you got money now!" said Chet. "I got more besides that, an' I figure I'll make more yet." He was glad he could pay a part of the debt he owed. He stood up. "Uh—I think I'll go talk to Typhoon a while. I'm gettin' him used to me. Makin' friends."

Lisbeth said quickly:

"I didn't see him. Can I come, Chet?"

Chet hesitated, and nodded. He held the door for her. They went out into the glamorous darkness, leaving Hanks whining of persecution.

Lisbeth took Chet's hand.

"Do you think I—improved in looks?" asked Lisbeth hungrily. "D'you think I'm pretty, Chet?"

"Sure you are," said Chet abstractedly. He was listening. He thought he heard a horse pounding somewhere off in the distance. "Right pretty."

LISBETH'S breath seemed to come quickly.

"Chet, I—I was that glad to see you, all growed up, that I—I woulda kissed you if you wanted me to."

"I'd have wanted to if I'd thought I could," said Chet, and laughed. "Heah's the corral. Now—"

"I—I don't mind if y'make up for it now," said Lisbeth rather desperately. "If y'want to—"

Chet hesitated, and saw himself as idiotic. He said, "Shucks!" and bent down. His intention was a trivial and brotherly sort of kiss, such as was wholly proper between foster-brother and sister.

But it did not work out that way. Lisbeth kissed him once—and clung to him. Her heart pounded against his body.

Chet stepped back, muttering, "My Gawd!" Lisbeth caught her breath unsteadily.

"I—always did like you, Chet," she said unevenly, "I—sure am glad you came back!"

Then the hoof-beats Chet thought he'd heard, sounded clear and louder.

The horse drew rein before the house. A voice called *"Chet! Hey, Chet!"* It was Buck Enderby. And Chet called back:

"Yay, Buck! Thisaway! I'm out at the corral!"

The hoof-beats of Buck's mount came toward them. Lisbeth suddenly loosened Chet's hand and slipped away into the blackness. Minutes later Buck's mount loomed up. Buck grinned.

"That was somethin' today, Chet! Wa'n't it? Did you ever see any man get so mad so quick? What's th' trouble with you an' Wallace?"

"Dam'f I know," said Chet. "I used to see him sometimes, when I was a kid. He never paid any attention to me then.

"Heah's Typhoon. He's a horse, Buck!"

They leaned on the corral fence together, peering through the darkness at the animals within. Neither of them had eyes for the dun horse. They looked at Typhoon, sturdily built, with a barrel of a chest and every member precisely designed to suit. Chet outlined his plans for him, as one horseman to another. Buck approved them enviously, but demurred because of the time it would take.

"If a fella could take time to break a horse that way," he conceded, "an' if he hadda horse like him to work on, he'd get somethin'! But my Gawd, Chet—" Then he stopped and said vexedly. "I just got reminded. Wallace said he wanted to see me tonight. I went over. 'This fella Chet Holliday a friend o' yours?' he asked me. I said you were. An' he says, 'I'm not malignin' your friends, Buck, but it's worth five hundred dollars to me if he'll leave this part of the country an' stay away.' What in hell's the matter, Chet?"

Chet considered, wrinkling his brow.

"Some fool mistake," he grunted. "He thinks I'm somebody else."

"It ain't that," said Buck. "It was when I mentioned y'name that he got het up. That an' the Hankses. He sent me back with a letter to de Aviguez today, an' I'm guessin' it was about you."

Chet remembered something Hanks had said. The Sheriff took orders from de Aviguez. He told Buck that, and about the Sheriff—ordering him out of town.

"Hell!" said Buck disgustedly. "Wallace is a good fella, but he acts like he was crazy, now. Y'plumb sure y'don't know what it's all about?"

At the cushioned thuddings of yet another horse, Chet turned his head. The horse was coming toward the corral from the squatter's shack. They hadn't heard its arrival there. The other horse was visible as a dim shape. The small boy dropped from a stirrup and called:

"Hey, Chet! Somebody t' see you!"

Chet stirred, against the corral fence. Then the figure on the horse spoke, and at the first sound of the voice Chet started.

"There are two of you there. I don't know which of you just came into this part of the country, but I've something to tell him."

Chet could not speak. The voice was that of Carol Bradley, the girl he had talked to only this morning, and once before behind the corrals at the Deadwood rodeo. It was the voice of the girl who'd been his dream.

"To that man," said Carol quietly, "I have to say that if he has any decency in him at all, he'll leave here at once. The Hanks have gotten in a lot of trouble lately, and that man has been a horse-thief and a convict. If he stays with them, they'll be persecuted!"

She stopped. Buck choked on something in his throat. Chet was silent.

"I mean what I say," Carol insisted. "Even enough to be willing to pay that man to go away and give me a chance to do something for the Hanks."

Buck said in a strangled voice:

"Uh—Miss Carol, d'you mean that Chet heah is a convict an' a horse-thief? I'd admire to meet the man who told you that! It ain't so!"

"Buck?" Carol seemed to start. "Is that you? But it is so, Buck! Mr. de Aviguez sent me up a note, urging me to get this man away from the Hanks. Your friend, Buck, only got out of prison last week after a four-year term for horse-stealing!"

"I suppose, ma'am," Chet said drily. "I was in solitary confinement up in Deadwood?"

Carol exclaimed as the light revealed his face. She was dumb-founded. She had believed the message she carried. And now she was utterly at a loss to explain it.

CHAPTER III

CAROL refused Buck's offer to ride back to the JW with her. In half an hour, her errand had become absurd. She laughed as she shook hands with Chet.

"I do have to apologize," she said ruefully. "That was such a silly mistake! But the note was quite definite. Mr. de Aviguez works hard to keep things straight around here and Uncle backs him up, and sometimes I interfere with both of them."

"They just about run the county, them two," said Buck shortly. "De Aviguez through politics, Wallace through bein' the biggest man in this section. But I don't care so much for that de Aviguez."

Carol shrugged.

"He's let me interfere, sometimes, to help people out."

"Huh!" said Buck. "That's to please y' uncle. You' better tell him he's all wrong about Chet."

"I'll try," said Carol. She turned her horse about. "And I do apologize to you—er—Chet. Really! And I'd like to see Typhoon again by daylight. May I?"

"Naturally, ma'm," said Chet quietly. "Right much of an honor to have you heah."

She waved her hand and rode away. The two men listened as her horse's hoofbeats diminished. Then Buck said venomously:

"Some day I'm goin' to bust de Aviguez in the nose!"

"Is it safe for her to be ridin' around at night by herself?" Chet asked abruptly.

"Yeah. These parts, anyways. De Aviguez is a dam' politician, but he does back up the Sheriff."

"Yeah," said Chet. He seemed to brood a little. "Tell you what, Buck. You better ride on. The way may be safe enough, but it'd be better to have somebody ridin' with her. I'll see you some more. I'm stayin' around a while."

Buck climbed on his horse and said casually:

"Reg'n you' right. See y'later."

His horse trotted away into the darkness. Chet stood still, brooding as before. There was a movement, and Lisbeth came close.

"They' gone?"

"Yeah," said Chet abstractedly. "I got somethin' I want to ask your pa about. Let's go back."

They walked together toward the shack.

"Uh—Chet," she said awkwardly. "I want to tell you somethin'."

"What, Lisbeth?"

"I—uh—" she stammered a little. "I wanted to tell you that I don't let fellas kiss me. Not other fellas."

"Shucks," said Chet. "We' like brother an' sister. That was all right."

She said quickly:

"But we ain't brother an' sister. Not really."

He nodded. Five steps. Ten. She said desperately:

"Chet, I—uh—I was hopin' you'd like me."

"I do. You' a right sweet little kid."

They reached the door of the shack. Chet pushed the door open.

Hanks looked scared.

"They' gone, Chet?" he asked uneasily. "Miss Carol come by an' told us about the trouble you' been in—"

"Yeah?" said Chet drily. "It was a lie. I'm not in trouble. I haven't been in trouble. She's proof of it herself. Forget it."

Hanks was still unconvinced. He said hopelessly:

"But all the same, if Mistuh de Aviguez has got it in for yuh—"

"It's not him," said Chet curtly. "It's Wallace. Listen!"

He told about meeting Wallace earlier that day. Of Buck's mentioning his name, and Wallace's immediate flare of rage. Then of Wallace sending a note to de Aviguez, and the Sheriff's subsequent attempt to run him out of town. Now, Wallace's offer of five hundred dollars to get him out of Fighting Horse Valley, and de Aviguez's transparent lie in a note to Carol. Everything seemed to stem from Wallace's hatred.

"But what I want to know," said Chet angrily, "is what makes him act that way? Is he plumb loco? I never did anything to him when I was a kid, did I, that he's holdin' against me?"

HANKS had listened with his mouth hanging open. Now he stirred uneasily.

"I—uh—don't reg'n he's got anything against you personal, Chet," he admitted. "But he's sure down on you just the same."

"Why?" demanded Chet.

"Why—uh—" Hanks squirmed apprehensively. "You look right much like your pa, Chet."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Hanks was more apprehensive still.

"I thought y'knew, Chet. Y'see, Wallace hadda right pretty wife. Prettiest woman I ever saw, I reg'n. He was right crazy about her, an'—uh—she liked your pa an'—uh—they run off."

Chet stared.

"Y'pa was a right han'some fella," said Hanks uneasily. "He'd been married, an' his wife died. He come up heah. They was prospectin' around with mines an' such then. Thought the whole Fightin' Horse Valley was goin' to be a minin' district. Y'pa come up as a kinda engineer to boss the runnin' of a drift to get to the ore that was going' to make everybody rich. An' then—well—one night y'pa an' Wallace's wife turned up missin'. Mistuh de Aviguez found out they'd rid across-country to the railroad. Theah horses came back two-three days later, saddles an' bridles gone. They just run off together."

Chet said harshly:

"And I look like my father. That's why Wallace hates me, eh?"

"I reg'n 'tis, Chet."

"I see," said Chet. He sat still. A long time later he stood up and shook himself. "I'm goin' to bed, suh. Wheah do I bunk?"

Hanks roused himself.

"Lisbeth hadda room all to herself. We' goin' to give it to you."

"I'd rather not—"

"Chet!" Lisbeth flushed hotly. "Please take it! I—want y'to!"

Hanks' worried frown stayed with Chet in the darkness long after he should have gone to sleep.

But the main thing that kept Chet awake was the thought of Carol Bradley. She'd helped the Hanks. 'Bijah Hanks said they'd have starved if it hadn't been for her. And, hearing from de Aviguez that they harbored a criminal, she'd come straight to the point to appeal to that criminal to go away lest he bring misfortune upon them. She'd found Chet instead. She would come back, some time or another, to look at Typhoon and talk horses with Chet. She knew them, too.

And Wallace, hating Chet for what his father had done these twenty years past, —what would Wallace say and do when he found his niece on friendly terms with Chet?

Chet was up early. He found Lisbeth at work in the kitchen. She looked at him with warm, adoring brown eyes as she served him breakfast.

He forgot her, though, when he got down to the corral. Typhoon had seen him coming. When Chet stepped inside the gate, the big horse faced him warily. This had looked to Typhoon like the beginning of many other mornings, when Chet had appeared with a rope in his hand inside a corral gate.

He watched the rope. He would dodge it if he could make a savage dash upon Chet. If the rope settled upon him nevertheless, he would fight the rope. He would fight the saddling process, not crazily but with a cold intelligence. And when Chet was in the saddle he always fought like a mad thing. There was no trick any other horse had ever devised for unseating his rider which Typhoon did not know and use. In two months, Chet had ridden him twice. Just twice he'd actually brought Typhoon under real control. Half a dozen times he'd worked him to exhaustion. Perhaps a dozen times more he'd stayed in the saddle from three to five minutes.

Typhoon was making Chet a superlative rider. But Chet, by leaving Typhoon's spirit whole, was making him a genius among bad horses. He could have "broken" Typhoon. He could, perhaps, have conquered him. But such a body as Typhoon possessed was worthy of a spirit to match it. Chet could not put his feeling into words, but he felt somehow that to cripple the yellow horse's spirit would be as despicable a thing as to mutilate his body. So far they were antagonists, enemies; but it seemed to Chet that there was growing up in Typhoon, fitfully and as yet but vaguely, the sort of liking for him that even the bitterest of enemies may feel for each other, where there is respect.

This morning Typhoon watched warily, nostrils aflare, one fore-hoof poised for the avalanche-like dash that would follow the rope's casting.

CHET nodded soberly to him. But he roped the dun horse. And as he rode away he felt Typhoon's gaze following him, as if Typhoon were puzzled.

The ground sloped upward. Trees appeared. In half an hour, Chet had reached a point of vantage from which he could see Alminas, eight miles away. He pulled a map out of his pocket, then, and studied it carefully. Alminas as one point. A streambed here. . . . The map had been made by the engineer in charge, many years before. Chet suddenly realized that it was his own father's work. Full details for possible development of the mine had been worked out. Chet had all those details, together with the inescapable mathematics which proved that with gold at twenty dollars an ounce the mine would not pay, but that at thirty-five dollars an ounce it would.

His first sight of his property was the dump-heap. It was half hidden by vines. He saw a moldy, fragmented mass of wood which would have been a tool-shed long ago. The brick-red of iron rust. Streaked, rotted wooden ties. A hand-car track. That led from the dump to an also vine-grown mass of rent and broken rock. It disappeared under that confusion.

Chet tethered the dun horse and explored painstakingly. He came back to the tumbled mass of broken stone.

"No doubt about it," he reflected ruefully. "It's a cave-in. I got to pull that stuff away before I look at what I bought."

But he sighted along the level of the hand-car track. The drift would certainly not be less than four feet tall, and probably six. The prospect was not bad. Climbing up and pulling away a relatively small amount of rock would enable Chet to slip down into the drift and get fresh ore-samples to confirm the ancient assays. But it wasn't a job for one man, at that.

He poked about a little longer. Then he shrugged. He found rocks in the dump-heap that looked like the ore he'd carefully learned about. He smashed those rocks and carried away fragments as samples.

"Might as well check up. Get assays on 'em."

He went back to the dun horse. And headed for Alminas.

He rode into Alminas with a faint frown on his face. He bought a box and wrapping-paper and packed up his samples. He mailed them off. Frowning more deeply, as he came out of the post-office, he saw the office of Julian de Aviguez, attorney-at-law. He made directly for it and an elaborately made-up secretary received him with conscious haughtiness.

"Mr. de Aviguez," said Chet briefly. "My name's Chet Holliday. I think he'll see me."

The secretary disappeared gracefully. She came back to smile at him and hold a door wide.

Chet went in. He shared Buck's feeling of dislike immediately. De Aviguez was in the act of rising cordially, thrusting forward a pudgy hand and chuckling as he greeted Chet. He was a little man, de Aviguez, with what seemed to be rolls of fat about his shoulders which gave the effect of an abnormally short neck.

"I think," chuckled de Aviguez, "that you came in to raise a little hell, Mr.

Holliday. Didn't you? In your place that's certainly what I'd do! But I assure you that Miss Bradley has made me thoroughly ashamed of myself."

"I came in," said Chet evenly, "to raise more than a little hell. To raise a whole lot."

De Aviguez laughed.

"I'm guilty! The Sheriff saw you. He'd seen your picture somewhere and thought it was on an old reward notice, though now I realize it must have been in a rodeo news-story. But it led him to suspect you of a highly colored criminal career. I offer my apology. I'll make it as public as you like, and in any form, verbal, written, or printed! I don't often make a mistake, and when I do, I like to make amends."

"I'd appreciate it," said Chet, "if you'll take it back as far as Miss Bradley is concerned."

"I've done that," said de Aviguez. "I crawled. She made me."

"An' you might call off the Sheriff," suggested Chet.

"Go to see him," said de Aviguez, and chuckled. "I gave him the devil for half an hour for making me ridiculous. He'll apologize!"

Chet shrugged. He stood up. He did not like de Aviguez, but he could find no fault with so sweeping a confession of error.

"Then," he observed, "I've got no excuse to raise hell."

"But wait a moment!" insisted de Aviguez cordially. "I tried to do you harm, though with the best intentions in the world. I'd like to make you real amends! Tell me. If your business here is not secret, perhaps I can expedite it. A word in the proper ear, you know . . . And I will be most happy to utter it."

He chuckled infectiously, but somehow Chet did not join in.

"There bein' so much talk about me," Chet said quietly, "maybe I'd better explain just what I aim to do."

He drew his documents from his pockets. He began to explain just what he intended to do and why, and what results he expected to get. Nothing could be done to hinder him now, of course. His deeds were recorded. His legal position was unassailable. He traced out, absorbedly, the whole idea of working the mine he'd bought.

"Maybe," he finished drily, "it's a fool stunt. A gamble, anyhow. But theah's nothin' mysterious about it. All clear?"

Then he started. He'd been very much absorbed. Now he looked at de Aviguez. And de Aviguez had turned a sickly white color. De Aviguez's hands shook visibly. He tried to speak, and his throat was dry. But he smiled. It was a most amazing grimace, the macabre grin of a death-mask.

"It is very clear," said de Aviguez. "It is a remarkable idea. It is so excellent an idea, Mr. Holliday, that I would gladly invest in it myself. Would you consider a partnership or an outright sale?"

But his face, his cheeks, even his lips were ashy gray.

CHAPTER IV

A MINIATURE hurricane was at work in the middle of the small corral. A tangle of dust and horse-flesh and human; of man, horse, saddle and flying earth. From that small hurricane came sounds. The thudding of hoofs. The squeaking of leather. Now and again a snort. Chet's voice, high and joyous.

"Go it, fella! You got me slippin'!"

The hurricane shifted position. It bounced into the air and for an instant was free of its own dust-cloud. It was a magnificent yellow horse and its rider. In the one moment when it could be seen clearly, the horse was startlingly distinct, muscles taut, legs distorted by the effort of the spring then still in being. And the rider was not solidly in the saddle as he had been. Half an inch of daylight showed below him.

Carol exclaimed sharply. Her whole body went tense. The fighting pair, man and horse, vanished in a fresh-raised cloud of dust. The flash of yellow hide. A glimpse of the man, still miraculously in the saddle. Then a sort of spout of fighting bedlam. Typhoon was bucking, and with every jump he landed his own length behind the start of that buck. He traded ends. He whirled, bucking. He was twelve hundred pounds of living dynamite. He bucked in a savage circle, exploding into frenzied effort and fresh gyrations before it seemed even that his hoofs touched the ground from the last previous jump.

Chet was firm in the saddle again. His voice once more:

"Didn't get me that time! Show me somethin', horse!"

And then the yellow horse seemed to go mad. He had been as a cyclone before.

Now he became ten times more fenzied. He squealed and bellowed in purest rage. And he fought insanely to unseat his rider, evidencing the insensate ferocity of sheer mania.

But Carol relaxed. Raging like this, Typhoon was less dangerous than when using every ounce of the brains packed in that long skull of his. He's been fighting scientifically. He had been a skilled and deadly antagonist. Now he was merely a maddened, raging horse, screaming with fury because he could not pitch his rider into the dust and then paw the life out of him.

Chet's voice came from the dust-cloud for the third time.

"Fella, y'lost y'temper! Cool down, now, an' get me outa this saddle! Y'll never make it while y'mad!"

For half a minute the frenzy seemed to continue. Then, abruptly, it stopped. Typhoon and Chet emerged together from the dust-cloud. Typhoon was standing still, snorting. He turned his head and his eye rolled back. Chet grinned at him.

"That's the trick, ol' fella! Cool down an' then y'll get somewheah!"

Typhoon breathed deeply, getting back his wind. Chet talked to him. Then the yellow horse snorted as if in warning, flung down his head, and was once more the deadly, scientific fighter. He and Chet disappeared again into the dust-cloud of their own raising.

"Bravo, Typhoon! Good for you!" cried Carol from the corral fence. "Good horse! Lick him, Typhoon!"

She clapped her hands, watching the battle with shining eyes.

This wasn't the first fight Carol had seen between Chet and the big outlaw. For a week and more she'd been coming over to the little corral behind the Hanks' squatter-holding. She'd come the first time to assure Chet that de Aviguez knew he'd been wrong about Chet's status in the world of honest men. She'd watched a workout of Typhoon then. She'd come back to see another, and another. They fascinated her.

The contest between Chet and Typhoon was not that between inveterate enemies, now. Typhoon had been a very famous outlaw horse. He'd proved his mettle young. Too young, in fact. He hadn't really reached his full strength and endurance when he was first billed as the horse no living man could ride. But the craft, the cunning that he learned before Chet mounted and rode him in the Deadwood rodeo was still safely tucked away in his brain. To it was now added greater strength and the battle wisdom of the old campaigner. Typhoon was as nearly unridable as any horse could possibly be.

BUT he was not a mean horse. He wasn't a killer. In rodeo corrals Typhoon had learned that men respected him. They would do their best to conquer him, but they would fight fairly. He would not be starved. He would not be beaten. Saddled in a chute, mounted with due precaution, once the man was on his back it was a fair fight. And two seasons of such combats had brought out in Typhoon the fierce pride and a magnificent fighting spirit.

Now Chet had him. And Typhoon probably liked Chet. Chet was fair. He held no grudge. He took no smallest particle of advantage. And the battles they had almost daily were battles between equals who respected each other. The appearance of Chet in the corral with a rope was the beginning of a conflict. The moment of unsaddling was the end. Typhoon regarded Chet with the level gaze of one who contemplates an equal. That Chet rubbed him down after each battle he accepted, somehow, as a favor one warrior may receive from another between hostilities.

But Typhoon was not being "broken." Not at all. It looked as if their private, chivalrous war were becoming merely a long, drawn-out campaign in which Typhoon invented new methods of fighting and Chet invented means of countering them. And it worried Chet. He wanted Typhoon whole. And if the big horse once became convinced that Chet was master, it might break his pride and ruin him. That sounded absurd, of course. It would be absurd of most horses. But Chet knew Typhoon.

When this morning's fight was over and he was rubbing Typhoon down with an old gunny-sack, Carol leaned over the fence to watch.

"Oh, what a horse he is, Chet!" she said breathlessly. "I've never seen anything like him! Never!"

"He's got brains," said Chet, rubbing busily. "Doggone him, I'm afraid he's got too much brains!"

Typhoon turned his head and looked

down at Chet, then rubbing busily at a hind-leg.

"He could bite you now, squatted down as you are, or he could reach forward with his hind-leg," said Carol uneasily. "You couldn't get away in time."

"Uh-huh," agreed Chet. "But that wouldn't be fair. He knows it. He won't." He grinned at Typhoon and stood up easily. "I'm gettin' worried about him, though," he added ruefully. "It looks like we' goin' to spend our lives together, him tryin' to prove I can't lick him, an' me tryin' to prove I can—an' I don't want to prove it!"

Typhoon shook himself and walked composedly away. The battle that day had been just about a draw. Chet had stayed on, but he hadn't ridden Typhoon. Every movement the big horse made had been of his own volition, not Chet's.

"He lost his temper again today, too," added Chet worriedly. "You saw him stop an' cool off an' then go back to work. I want him to want to carry me. I don't want to make him. An' he's got a kink in that horse-head of his that says if anybody ever sure-'nough rides him he's licked. An' when Typhoon gets licked, I'm scared he's goin' to be ruined!"

Carol's eyes went to Typhoon, then, but they came back to Chet.

"I'm glad you've got him," she said slowly. "Most men would want to show off that they could break him, once they'd ridden him. You want to win him. I like you for that, Chet."

Chet flushed uncomfortably.

"If I can get him like I hope," he explained awkwardly, "I'll have the best horse a man ever rode. I'd be proud of that."

He came out of the corral and closed the gate. Typhoon raised his head to watch him go away.

"Chet," said Carol abruptly, "what're you planning to do for the Hanks? You intend to do something, I know."

"Yeah," said Chet, frowning. "But it's not easy. Sam an' Dick are still in jail. I gave theah pa the money to pay theah fine, but he said they'd soon be out an' it'd be a shame to waste the money."

"That's like him," commented Carol. "But do you realize what's happening?"

"More hell-raising?" he asked.

"There's what amounts to organized persecution aimed at them."

"Because of me," said Chet grimly. "Your uncle hates me, hard!"

"He does, but he knows I know you, and I like you."

CHET stared at her in amazement.

"I told him," said Carol. "He went white when I did but he didn't forbid my coming here. He says you know why he hates you."

"Yeah," said Chet somberly. "He figures I'm bound to be a low-down sort of coyote. I can understan' it. Hadn't you better—uh—take his word for it?"

"He's wrong," Carol smiled. "I know what sort of person you are, Chet. Watching you and Typhoon."

"Umph," said Chet, curtly changing the subject. "But what's your reason for doin' so much for the Hanks? Theah's so much can be done for them, an' no more."

"I wonder!" said Carol. She pointed to the house. "There are four children here, Chet. 'Bijah Hanks and their mother simply drifted into Fighting Horse Valley a long time ago. They were squatters. It may be just laziness that kept them from keeping on the move, but they have a sort of root in the Valley now. Haven't they?"

"I see." Chet nodded.

"Their children, with half a chance, won't be squatters. With a chance, they'll do well enough. Another generation and they'll be neither squatters nor renters, but ranchers or farmers anyhow. And I want to see that they get that chance."

"A right decent thought," said Chet.

Carol started. Tommy Hanks flashed from the brush alongside them like a quail from cover. He fled, diving into the house.

Carol watched blankly. Chet said curtly: "He hangs around me a lot."

She laughed. Then she said:

"I was going to ask you why you're here in the Valley."

"You' goin' home now?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I'll show you. Wait till I get saddled up."

Chet and Carol rode together up into the hills. Chet knew the way perfectly, now. He'd been up here more than once. There were some signs of his labor in evidence. A place where vines had been cleared away above a cave-in. A fresh, though small, dump of stones. He showed her around, citing facts and figures.

"But before I can sure-'nough do any-

thing," he explained, "I've got to get inside that drift an' check up with fresh samples. I've picked out a place to get in, an' I've been hauling away all the stones one man can handle. Some of 'em need two men, though, even with a block an' fall. So I'm goin' to hire Dick an' Sam when they get outa jail."

Carol smiled.

"Hard to think of you as a miner, Chet."

"Shucks! I worked in a mine all last winter," he told her. "I had a kinda idea like this then. Not this mine, o'course. It was just luck that I happened to run across the ol' fella that owned the mineral rights heah. But I bought 'em, an' then the price of gold went up. All creation went to pannin', but I'd got set so I knew what I was doin'."

Carol said, smiling:

"I think Uncle would like you if he didn't hate you so much. What's that about, Chet? You and Uncle?"

Chet shrugged.

"Forget it. Somethin' that happened when I was a baby an' you weren't born. Let him forget it, too. You goin' back home now?"

"Yes."

"I'll ride a way with you."

They rode side by side, and the sun sank lower and ever lower in the sky. Tall hills rose above them, and deep valleys dropped away below. The west became a glory of gold and crimson. A single bright, unwinking star shone out. There was no sound except the thudding of their horses' hoofs, and the creaking of saddle-leather. Somehow they had fallen silent. They rode a long time without a word. Then Carol said:

"When you get your mine going and are making a lot of money, what are you going to do with it?"

Chet spread out his hands and shook his head.

"No girl you're going to hunt up and marry?"

Chet looked queerly at her.

"After talkin' to you back of the corral at Deadwood," he admitted, "I had you in my mind as a kinda dream. If you were somebody else, I'd say I was goin' to try to hunt you up. But you' heah."

CAROL regarded him doubtfully.

"That—doesn't make sense, Chet."

"If I make out with the mine," said Chet briefly, "I'm goin' to ask you to marry me. Get set to let me down easy, will you?"

Carol reined in her horse to stare at him.

"You're—in love with me?" she demanded incredulously. "You haven't said a single sentimental thing! You haven't asked—"

"Shucks!" said Chet. "I'm in love with you all right! An' I'm goin' to ask you plenty. Marriage is about all theah is, the way I see it. But forget it for a while, Carol. Maybe I won't make out."

He waited, almost impatiently, for her to move on. Suddenly Carol laughed. Chet's face stiffened. And Carol stopped short, but she still smiled at him.

"Chet," she said, "you're silly and you're cheating. Just suppose that I loved you!"

Chet said impassively:

"Kinda absurd, ma'm."

"Nothing of the kind!" said Carol. "It isn't! If I loved you, do you think I'd want to sit back and wait for you to come and bring me something you'd earned, not because you loved me but because your vanity wouldn't let you ask me to marry you otherwise?"

"That's not the idea," he said painstakingly. "I'm—"

"I'll tell you right now!" said Carol hotly. "If you come to me like that I'll refuse you! If you want to marry me, you've got to ask me while I can have my share in your winning! While I can give belief in you and trust in you and love for you toward a future for both of us! Do you think I want everything done without a share in doing it? Don't you think I want—"

Chet was pale, but his eyes glowed.

"But do you want it?" he asked quietly. "Honest?"

"Silly!" she said breathlessly. "Of course I do!"

He caught her and held her close in his arms. Their two mounts stayed perfectly still. Perhaps they exchanged patient equine glances, but that was all.

"S-silly!" said Carol at last. "I'm going home now. You can't come. Uncle hates you. You know it. But you can kiss me again. S-several times."

Again the two horses were perfectly still. But first Carol's horse, and an instant later Chet's dun animal, pricked up their ears as at some approaching sound.

And then two riders came into view. The

last golden colorings in the west were fading now, but there was still light to see by. One of the two riders was Buck Enderby. The other—

Something like a cry broke from the other man. Carol looked quickly and the beginning of a flush came, but was checked by the terrible, still rage she saw on her uncle's face. She turned from Chet to face him squarely.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," she said clearly, "because of the way you'll feel. But Chet and I—we've found out we love each other. And—"

The older man did cry out, now. And it was a sound which was not pure fury. There was pain in it. There was a bitter, raging anguish in it. He flung his horse forward, clawing at his hip. A long six-shooter came out of the holster. It darted forward to line up on Chet's heart.

CHAPTER V

CHET was oiling a six-gun, reflectively, when Lisbeth came and stood beside him. It was the kitchen of the Hanks' shack, and morning sunshine came through the solitary window. The kitchen was cleaner, now. Lisbeth had worked furiously upon it. Her blonde hair was carefully arranged, too. She watched as Chet wiped out the barrel of his gun and squinted through it.

"What' you doin' that for, Chet?" she demanded curiously.

"I might need it," he said briefly.

He was satisfied. He put back the cylinder and revolved it, listening to the clicks. He pulled trigger on the empty gun, making sure the cylinder went over one full space each time.

"You ain't goin' to go killin' anybody, Chet? What d'you pack that thing for anyway?"

"Fella tried to bump me off las' night," said Chet.

"What'd you do?" she asked. "Shoot him?"

"No need," said Chet. "Buck Enderby grabbed his arm. Wrestled with him an' took his gun away from him."

"Who was it?" she demanded.

"Wallace," said Chet briefly. "He saw me—ridin' with Carol Bradley an' didn't like it."

"You can handle him." Then Lisbeth added angrily, "But I don't like you ridin' with her either! I wish she wouldn't come around heah! Pa whines an' she helps him out. But she don't care nothin' about us!"

Chet looked up sharply.

"What's the idea, Lisbeth?"

"Her sayin' she'd ought to help us grow up somethin' besides squatters!" Lisbeth's eyes flared. "Talkin' like that to you!"

"You were listenin'. I see," Chet observed drily.

"Tommy was," said Lisbeth sullenly. "I told him to. An' maybe she did come around to help us before, but it ain't that now. She's after you, Chet! And she ain't got any right to! She ought to leave you alone!" She stamped her foot, and said in a curious childish stubbornness, "I saw you first!"

Chet holstered his reloaded gun and went irritably outside to go down to the corral. A thin shout reached his ears. Buck Enderby was heading for the house. Chet waved and went gloomily down to where Typhoon pricked up his ears at sight of him but gave no other sign of welcome. Chet leaned morosely on the corral fence. Buck rode up and slid out of the saddle.

"Well?" said Chet bitterly.

"It's hell," said Buck. He began to roll a cigarette. "I'm heah all charged up with messages. Wallace fired me three times on the way home las' night, for grabbin' his hand an' keepin' him from shootin' you. He made me plumb mad an' I told him I hadn't done nothin' of the kind. I'd kept you from havin' to shoot him. An' he wa'n't grateful even then!"

Chet said:

"Carol?"

"A dam' good sorta fella, she is!" said Buck warmly. "I wouldn't mind havin' a girl like that stickin' up for me! She fought him cool an' polite. She asked him outright why he hated you. An' he choked up an' wouldn't tell her."

"Yeah," said Chet somberly. "He wouldn't. It'd hurt too much to say it. I feel kinda sorry for him."

"Hell!" said Buck. "Wait till you heah the rest of it! He calmed down before he got home. He even 'pologized to me. He's a white man, dammit! An' in my hearin' he told Miss Carol, pale as death, that he'd do anything in creation for her, but you—" Buck stopped. "Hell, Chet! I ain't never seen any man sufferin' like he was! He hates you an' he don't hate you! He wants to see you dead, an' he wouldn't lift a

finger to hurt you without he lost his head like he did las' night."

Chet nodded.

"An' so—?"

"Miss Carol will be comin' over to watch you fight Typhoon some more. Not today, prob'ly. Most likely tomorrow. She said to tell you she meant everything she said, yesterday. I'm guessin' that's satisfactory."

"Yeah," said Chet. "Tell her the same from me."

"I'm supposed to be Cupid's messenger?" asked Buck scornfully. "Go to blazes! That's the message from her. Wallace told me to explain his position. He hopes to Gawd you break your neck. He regrets, he says, that he didn't give you a good enough excuse to plug him. He'd feel much better if you had. He'll pay you any sum you name if you'll get to hell outa heah an' stay out. I told him that was no use, but he said it. An' he's not goin' to lift a han' to butt into your affairs, but for Gawd's sake keep away from him!"

"That suits me all right," said Chet. "I feel sorry enough for him, an' I don't blame him any, but Carol an' me, we' a new set of folks. What other people did ain't our business."

BUCK nodded.

"All o' which," he observed, "is clear as mud to me. I come over to deliver those messages. I'm goin' back. But theah's one thing I want you to get in your head, Chet. You' my friend. But I kinda like him too. In this ruckus you two are havin', I'm neutral, outside of tryin' to stop homicide if possible."

"O.K.," said Chet morosely. "Best dam' thing you can do. Thanks."

Buck waved his hand and rode away. Chet looked at Typhoon. Typhoon regarded him with a wary, anticipatory interest. Chet got his rope and Typhoon straightened up.

Then Tommy Hanks came running down from the house.

"Chet! Hey, Chet!"

Chet turned.

"Pa wants yuh!" panted Tommy. "He went down to th' store an' they wouldn't sell him nothin'. Pa's about cryin'."

Chet grunted. He went back to the house. 'Bijah Hanks was sitting abjectly in a chair, weak tears in his eyes.

"Folks don't want us around heah, Chet," he said miserably. "We ain't done nobody any harm, but the storekeeper, he cussed me out for a dam' squatter an' says the quicker we get chased outa the Valley, the better. He says none o' the other storekeepers'll sell us nothin' either. What' we goin' to do, Chet? We'll starve! Nobody'll hire us! Nobody'll sell us nothin'! Eve'ybody's against a poor man . . ."

Chet said briefly:

"What y'want from the store?"

He got the list, in Lisbeth's round, unformed handwriting. He went back to the corral and saddled up. The dun horse. He went grimly off down the road. Half an hour later, he came back with a flour-sack containing the desired articles. His eyes were burning.

"Word's been passed around that Wallace is down on you," he said, seething. "That accounts for all of it. But any time you want somethin' at that store, you go theah! That fella won't refuse to sell you any more!"

"Y-you didn't shoot him, Chet?" asked 'Bijah, half hopeful and half afraid.

"No," said Chet savagely. "I just rammed a gun-barrel partway down his throat an' explained that while you had money to pay for what you bought, he was goin' to sell to you. He agreed with me."

"Uh—y'did?" 'Bijah was plainly delighted. "That'll show 'em!" Then a thought came to him. "Uh—Chet," he said hopefully. "Y'added in that he'd better give me credit when I need that too, didn't yuh?"

Chet slammed the door behind him. He mounted and rode away again. This time he headed in a different direction. His lips set in a grim line, he headed straight for the JW ranchhouse.

It was a fairly long ride, but neither his wrath nor his grimness had lessened when he got there. He rode up to the front door of the house. A Mexican servant opened the door.

"Mistuh Wallace," said Chet grimly. "My name's Chet Holliday."

The servant vanished. Silence. Polished floors. Rugs. Hangings. The house had plainly been furnished to provide a proper background for a woman. Once it had been the wife who was the cause of Wallace's still-enduring hatred. Now, very obviously, it was Carol.

Footsteps. Wallace appeared, tall and gray and stiff, his hands clenched until the

knuckles showed white. He stared at Chet with smoldering flames in his eyes.

"You wanted to see me?" he said harshly. His voice broke from pure hatred. "Why, damn you—"

"I had a message from you," said Chet as harshly, "sayin' you hated me but were not goin' to butt into my affairs. I want to say to you, suh, that forbiddin' stores an' such to sell to my—uh—foster-parents is buttin' into my affairs! It's a dam' dirty trick to try to starve 'em out because you hate me!"

Wallace ground his teeth.

"If you're trying to pick a gun-fight," he said bitterly, "I'll oblige you! But I've done nothing of the sort you tell about!"

"Then you'll please me right much," Chet told him hotly, "if you'll correct a popular impression! Folks think you arranged it!"

Wallace struck his hands together. He was trembling with hatred.

"Get out!" he cried desperately. "Damn you, isn't it enough to remind me—without Carol—!" He choked. "You look—you look like that damned Holliday that—that . . . Can't you see I'm going mad from the sight of you? Get out before I kill you!"

Someone came in, quickly. It was Buck Enderby. He took Chet's arm.

"I don't take this kindly, Chet," he said coldly. "I saw y'horse outside. Only a coupla hours ago I told yuh—"

"Get him away!" cried Wallace. "For God's sake get him away! I want to kill him!"

CHET let Buck lead him out of the house. Once outside, Buck looked at him with angry eyes.

"I call it a dam' dirty trick!" he said furiously. "You know any time you an' Wallace get together theah's likely to be a gun-fight. An' y'know y'ought to kill him an' y'ought to be able to do it with the law on your side! But I call it a dam' dirty trick, you comin' heah!"

"Maybe," said Chet quietly, "but it was somethin' I had to do."

He told Buck curtly the reason for his coming. Buck snorted.

"Y'dam' fool, that's de Aviguez! He's just a dam' politician, tryin' to do Wallace a favor an' not knowin' how to set about it excep' in a dirty way. Go raise hell with him! Get!"

Fuming, Chet obeyed. He was angry all the way down deep inside. In part, perhaps, he was angry with himself. But he headed for Alminas and during the long ride he thought furiously. He did not cool down until the moment Alminas grew large before him.

Chet's anger flared up again when he dismounted before the ornate law-office. But de Aviguez was not in. The secretary gracefully expressed regret. She offered to give a message. Chet preferred to write it. He did, a curt statement that Wallace's name was being used to justify a campaign of persecution against the Hanks. That he, Chet, had gone to see Wallace, and Wallace wasn't responsible. Which left it up to de Aviguez, and Chet knew of his reason for doing it. Therefore de Aviguez would stop it at once.

The last was based on Buck's analysis of de Aviguez's action as designed to please Wallace. Chet signed and folded it, and left. Whereupon the graceful secretary took it immediately into the other room and handed it to de Aviguez, who relaxed as from painstaking quietness when she entered. And he read it, and read it again, and at the last phrase a sudden terror seemed to strike him. His face became sickly. He didn't believe Chet knew his motives. That was impossible! But he did not dare to disbelieve. Pale and frightened, he gave orders which met Chet's demands. And then he sent furtively for someone who could handle difficult matters decisively and privately.

But Chet hesitated, when he reached his horse again. He was at loose ends. Buck's explanation that de Aviguez wanted him out of the Fighting Horse country because it would please Wallace was all very well, but it didn't go far enough. How about that time de Aviguez had turned a pasty, sickly white while Chet outlined his plans for that caved-in mine he'd bought? De Aviguez had been terrified then. His face was a ghastly gray color. His hands had trembled. Nothing connected with Wallace would account for that!

In a sudden decision, Chet hunted up Jake Henniger.

He found him sitting on the doorstep of his shack, smoking dreamily. He took his pipe from his mouth to say cordially:

"*Buenas dias!* Glad t' see yuh, son."

"Umph," said Chet. "I got something on my mind. You' been around heah a long time. Maybe you can explain it."

Jake Henniger moved hospitably to share his doorstep.

"Set an' *habla,*" he said. "Glad to help yuh. Anything I know—an' I know a lot more'n most folks suspect—I'll tell yuh."

Chet sat down.

"I' been away," he said shortly, "since I was a kid. What's de Aviguez got against me since I' been back?"

Jake settled himself comfortably.

"What's happened?"

Chet told him. Everything. The attempt of the Sheriff to run him out of Fighting Horse Valley within an hour after his arrival. The lying message de Aviguez had sent to Carol, and his ghastly pallor when he heard about the plans for the mine Chet had bought. Now the persecution aimed at the Hanks, which was certainly inspired by de Aviguez.

"Now, you know a lot o' local history," finished Chet. "What's it all about?"

JAKE HENNIGER sat and smoked. His eyes rested dreamily upon the far distance. Presently he nodded his head. A little later he nodded it again, and more decidedly. And then he turned to Chet.

"Chet, *amigo,*" he said solemnly, "I see it all! *Por Dios!* I understan' everything! It's Fate! Yes, suh, it's Fate! Fate brought yuh back heah to get what's intended for yuh! *Seguro!* That's what it is!"

"From present indications," observed Chet, "it looks like Fate's working around to a kick in the pants."

"No, it all fits in," said Jake Henniger. "Everything! Listen heah, Chet! Y're-member 'Bijah Hanks' boys found a coupla old saddles with silver fittin's? An' Mistuh de Aviguez raised hell about it when they sold 'em?"

Chet shrugged.

"D'yuh know wheah they found 'em?" Chet shrugged.

"Close by that mine yuh bought!" said Jake Henniger significantly. "Y'see what that means?"

"No. What does it mean?"

"Treasure!" said Jake, profoundly. "Those saddles was drawed by the treasure in that hill! It was the mine your pa was workin' on, Chet. He bossed the runnin' of that drift into that hill. But the treasure in theah wa'n't meant for him, or for the fella that owned the mine then. That treasure is meant for yuh, Chet! Things happened so's it would wait for yuh!"

"Which don't account for de Aviguez."

"Yes, suh! It does!" Jake nodded more profoundly still. "Those saddles! Mistuh de Aviguez knows theah's treasure in that hill an' he aims to get it. He knows it was the big treasure in the hill that drawed the little treasure of saddle-fittin's close! But he couldn't get to own the ground so the treasure would be his. Yuh own it! He wants to get yuh in trouble, Chet, so's yuh'll sell it to him."

"I'll admit," said Chet skeptically, "he offered to buy it from me."

"Theah's more proof!" said Jake triumphantly. "Mistuh de Aviguez, he knows theah's treasure in that mine! He suspec's it's meant for yuh but he aims to try to get it anyways. That's what it's all about, Chet! That's every bit of it! Treasure! It's meant for you, an' Fate wouldn't let nobody else take it! Maybe that's why your pa runs off with Miz' Wallace, so theah'd be no more diggin' an' the treasure'd be lef' for you!"

Chet shrugged. It didn't seem very probable. His mind did not work like Jake's. Chet had a certain respect for facts, and the more facts one knew, the less probable Jake's dreamings appeared.

For instance, there were facts Chet did not know which de Aviguez did, which would have made Jake's theory untenable even to himself. De Aviguez was waiting at that moment for a man to come to his office. He'd sent for him. He knew the man as one capable of handling difficult matters decisively and privately. He knew that Chet was becoming difficult. And he knew what arrangements he was going to make for the handling of Chet.

But it did seem that Fate was concerned in this affair. Chet's coming to Alminas was, after all, ultimately the result of a dynamite explosion of twenty years before.

CHAPTER VI

CHET slid five yards in a cloud of dust and Carol gave a little gasping cry. Then he rolled over, got painfully to his feet, and grinned at her. Typhoon regarded him triumphantly, snorting.

"Damn!" said Chet. "That's three times this mornin'! That son-of-a-gun thought up a new trick an' by gosh, it works!"

He came limping to the corral fence, brushing himself off as he came.

"I hate him!" said Carol angrily. "I thought you were killed!"

"I'm not," Chet assured her. "But I'm plenty disgusted. I'm goin' to rest a minute an' get back on him."

"Please, Chet! I—I've got to go home! And I don't want to think of you—maybe landing on your head while I'm away!"

"Mmmh! You want to be on hand to see it, huh? 'Tell you what," said Chet, "I'll rub him down an' ride a ways with yuh. Yeah?"

"I'll wait," said Carol.

Chet limped toward Typhoon. The big yellow horse was bucking as if trying to get his saddle off. But he knew he couldn't, and he stopped when Chet came for him. He suffered himself to be led over to the rail, snorting.

"Braggin', doggone you!" said Chet. "Wait till tomorrow! I'll figure out that trick o' yours an' ride you to a frazzle!"

"He's tame!" said Carol blankly. "He let you catch him!"

"For unsaddlin', yeah," said Chet. "Sure! He's got sense. He knows plenty. He'll let me do most anything but ride him, dam' his hide!"

He loosened the cinches. Carol leaned on the fence and watched. Chet unsaddled and went over the big animal carefully with the gunnysack. Typhoon stood still. When Chet was through he took off the bridle and said:

"Go 'long with you, doggone you!"

Typhoon turned and regarded him through large, steady eyes. Then he broke into a trot and moved away to the other side of the corral.

"Y'know what he said to me then?" demanded Chet. "He told me to go take some ridin' lessons! Huh!"

But he grinned, though ruefully, as he sent a loop swishing up from the ground to the dun horse's neck.

"How far you' goin' to let me ride with you today?" he asked, hauling in. He should have walked up to the dun horse, but that would have taken him away from Carol.

"Not so far," said Carol. She frowned. "Chet, Uncle knows I come over here and he—hates it. Why does he hate you, Chet?"

"Somethin' my pa did to him," said Chet briefly. "My father musta been pretty much of a scoundrel. To me, too. He left me heah with the Hanks an' never sent a word or a penny back for theah takin' care of me."

Carol continued to frown.

"Uncle's given orders you aren't to be allowed on JW ground again," she said unhappily. "Anybody who sees you is to stop you if they have to shoot. But he doesn't try to interfere with me."

Chet tightened the cinches of his saddle and climbed up.

"I'm not criticizin' him," he said. "It's right inconvenient, but I can kinda understand it. Wheah you want to be kissed, Carol? Beyond that first clump o' trees, or over the hill?"

"Let's try both, and then decide!"

She let out her horse. And Chet, following her, saw a furtive movement among the brush near the corral. He saw Lisbeth's face, stricken and pale, peering out.

They rode on together, and presently she was saying soberly:

"But of course this can't go on forever, with Uncle feeling as he does. There's bound to be an explosion sooner or later."

"Yeah. An' it's up to me to speed up my job with that mine. I got a block an' fall I'm goin' to set up. I'll get out some ore, by hand, and ship it. With what I get, I'll hire some more help. Sooner or later I'll have a road an' a fleet of trucks haulin' ore for me—for us. We' partners now. I'm goin' to work harder, Carol."

WHEN she left him, smiling, to go on alone upon JW ground and so to her uncle's ranchhouse, Chet headed back to the Hanks to get the pulleys and ropes he'd bought, and the small ax to fell saplings for a sort of derrick-frame.

He took the ropes and blocks from his room and started back towards the mine.

He'd wasted most of the day hanging around the shack, waiting for Carol to turn up. Now it was near dusk, and he'd do well to get his block and tackle mounted over the pit he was making in the cave-in, before it got too dark to see. That was excusable. He had to see Carol, and only the day before she hadn't been able to come. But he felt that he was wasting time which was becoming precious. If matters came to a show-down and Carol had to make a choice between him and her uncle, Chet ought to have the mine operating and making a living for them both.

He rode up the dry stream-bed. Across the more or less level area with the tall wild grasses upon it. Into the defile which led between two steeply-rounded hills up to a ledge, and beyond to the place where the caved-in drift had been driven.

The coiled manila rope for the block and fall had been laid loosely across his saddlehorn, with the blocks knotted to it with string. Those blocks had been jangling and bumping against each other all the way up. One had been fretting at the coarse binder-twine with which they were tied. That twine parted, suddenly. It saved Chet's life.

A sharp crack sounded at just the instant he bent down to catch the slipping block. Something ripped through the crown of his Stetson and tore a jagged hole in the brim behind. If Chet had been riding upright, the bullet would have gone squarely in between his eyes. Bent over, it went whining disappointedly away into the empty spaces behind him.

One instant of startled, convulsive rigidity. Then Chet toppled out of the saddle. He landed in a heap, his gun out but hidden by his body. He waited, filled with a consuming wrath.

Silence. The echoes of the shot began to come back. Queer rat-tat-tatting echoes. A bird squawked somewhere. The silence became burdensome. Then, somewhere, a horse scraped its foot against a rock.

"Wallace figured I'd better be bumped off," reflected Chet coldly. Rage beat against the coolness which was necessary. "He sent somebody to do it, or he did it himself. On account o' Carol. That fella's watchin' now."

Something stirred among leaves a little distance off. It was an abrupt little flurry of movement, then stillness.

"Chipmunk," said Chet as coldly as before. "That fella's makin' sure he got me. Settin' still. He knows I started to bend over. He figures maybe this is a fake. He musta done this sort o' thing before."

The rifle cracked again. Something deadly and spiteful smashed among the rocks two yards beyond Chet. It had passed inches above his body. Chet risked an almost imperceptible movement. He knew the line of fire, now. He could see that the trail curved over, ahead. He'd almost reached the top of a rolling ascent. He'd been shot at from the level ground beyond. He was lying in the open, but that curving of the earth hid him from the view of the man who'd shot at him.

"Umph!" said Chet. "He sent a bullet no more'n inches over me. If I raise up any, he's goin' to see me sure. An' he's got a rifle."

He surveyed the life-saving slope ahead. By wriggling very, very close to the ground, he could get to better cover. If the man who was out to kill him knew his business, he wouldn't come walking openly up, however convinced he was of Chet's death. He'd circle around to a place where he could see, still from cover. He'd probably put another bullet in the form he considered lifeless. Then, and only then, he'd come out of hiding.

Chet crawled, snake-like, to the cover he'd seen. But even here he wasn't well off. The other man had a rifle, and he had only a six-gun, and the other man would be on higher ground and shooting downward. But, temporarily in shelter, Chet stared about. The trail dropped away more steeply still behind. Fifty or sixty feet back, he could probably get across to the marksman's side of the trail without being seen.

He did it, but it was an unpleasant sensation to make the dash across clear open space with only inexact knowledge of the marksman's location. Then he fell into luck. Thick brush grew here for a space. He holstered his own gun and climbed, taking infinite precautions against making a noise. Presently he looked down upon the trail. He was thirty feet higher than his horse and almost directly above it.

HE settled down vengefully to wait. He waited five minutes. Ten. Then a tiny rustling. Dusk was just beginning now, and he thirsted for this would-be murderer to come into the open before the obscurity made shooting inaccurate.

It happened as he wished. An infinitely cautious stirring, and a small figure slipped out of cover and moved swiftly and silently to where it could look down at the spot of Chet's collapse. It was a small man, a swarthy man, with a rifle held alertly ready. He carried that rifle as if it were a precious instrument.

He crawled the last few yards to the edge of the little bluff. He peered down. He froze. And then Chet spoke very grimly from a spot just five yards to his rear.

"Stick 'em up, fella! We' goin' to have a li'l conversation!"

The little man jumped erect with a gasp. He clutched his rifle convulsively. He stared at Chet as if he were a ghost. He came barely up to Chet's shoulder, and his face was lined and seamed and rat-like. Terror stared out of it now, but his lips parted in a venomous snarl, the instinctive reaction of a cornered animal.

"Yeah, y'missed," said Chet grimly. "I aim to make you talk, an' talk free, an' I ain't a bit particular how I make you do it! I'll take y'guns first. Put down that rifle!"

That was wisdom. A man with a rifle in his hand is dangerous, when it is loaded and ready for firing. To take such a weapon from him may be even more foolhardy than to command him to give you his six-gun. He has only to extend it and pull the trigger . . .

Snarling, the little man put down the rifle. He was no more than two feet from the edge of the bluff, but he stooped and turned, his neck twisted so he could still snarl at Chet, and laid the gun down behind him. He did it very carefully, as if it were something precious indeed.

Then he straightened up. He came up like a spring uncoiling. And the bellow of six-guns split the quietude of the mountain dusk. He'd had his hand behind him to put down the rifle. His hip had been turned. And he jerked out a six-gun in rising. Chet's gun flared the fraction of an instant before his. The shock of the heavy bullet hitting threw the little man's aim wide. But he pumped lead, snarling, and pumped it, wavering on his feet. The shots made a thunderous roar. It was not a pretty sight to see the two men, fifteen feet apart, with their guns flashing flame and smoke and death at each other.

Chet was utterly ruthless. His first shot had saved his life. But the little man jerked his gun back and only another heavy bullet, tearing into him, jolted it out of line again. There was no word spoken. There was no time. Chet had gotten in first shot. But it was a case of hit first, hit hard, and keep on hitting. The other man seemed a maniac, insensible to lead, until suddenly his knees buckled and he went sliding backward over the edge of the bluff.

He came to rest in a ghastly, untidy heap, not ten feet from the spot where he'd expected to find the dead body of Chet with a bullet in his brain.

Chet went sliding down after him. He kicked a six-gun out of a feebly struggling hand which still tried to bring it to bear upon Chet and pull the trigger. He bent down. Blood gushed out. He fumbled for the artery and pressed hard. The bleeding lessened. Holding it, he searched for other dangerous wounds. But the little man snarled once, and shuddered. After that he lay still.

A long time later, Chet stood up. He was grimly certain that there was nothing he could do. His eyes flamed. Then he heard a horse's hoofs. That would be this man's mount. He reholstered his own weapon. He hunted for the gun he'd kicked away. He put it back in the dead man's holster.

A sharp word made him look up, his hand instinctively going to his hip. But it was Buck Enderby, staring at him through the dusk.

"Chet!" he said harshly. "What's this?"

"Fella tried to dry-gulch me," said Chet grimly. "Y'can look at his six-gun. It's empty. Rifle around heah, likewise. That's been shot a coupla times, too."

He jerked his thumb toward the larger gun. It had fallen down the cliff with its owner. Buck got slowly off his horse.

"This heah's hell!" he said. "As if you ain't in trouble enough without a killin'!"

"It's your dam' Wallace!" said Chet thickly. "Carol's goin' to marry me, so he sets this hired killer on me!"

BUCK went over to the dead man and looked down at him. He struck a match and looked more closely.

"Umph! I know this fella," he said drily. "He's a deputy sheriff, sometimes—when theah's dirty work to be done for de Aviguez. Hop-head too, I'm suspectin'. I've heard tell theah's smugglin' goes on from the Border through heah. Fellas like these are handy sometimes."

"He's just the right kinda rat for Wallace to be settin' on me, then," raged Chet.

"Don't be a dam' fool!" snapped Buck. "This heah's trouble for you! Wallace didn't do this! He set me heah to line-ride an' keep you off JW ground just because he knew I was y'friend an' might be able to keep you off without shootin'!"

"Like hell!" said Chet. "I was on my way to my mine!"

"Which," said Buck sardonically, "is on JW ground! You own mineral rights, yeah. You got a right to dig. But it's JW ground an' Wallace sent me heah to keep you off. You, personal!"

Chet rolled a cigarette, his hands shaking with rage. He told Buck curtly every detail of the attempted murder and how it had resulted in the death of the would-be murderer. And Buck said angrily:

"I know it! I know it ain't your fault, Chet. But you' in bad already! You' in a jam!"

He frowned worriedly.

"If this fella had bumped me," said Chet shortly, "you'd have got the credit for my killin'."

"Yeah. I would. Me heah to stop you from goin' on JW land. You bumped. Sure I'd ha' got the credit! That's an idea, Chet!"

He frowned again, thinking.

"That's the story!" he said firmly. "I was ridin' along lookin' out for you, an' this fella mistook me for you an' took a shot at me. An' I bumped him. Yeah?"

"Like hell!" said Chet. "I take care of my own troubles!"

Buck swore at him.

"Why, y' dam' fool! This's the best an' the only way out! I won't get in any trouble! An' if theah is any hell raised, you can come an' get it any time!"

Chet didn't like it. It was only when Buck pointed out the suffering Carol would go through if he claimed the dead man as his victim and got in trouble on account of it, that he consented sullenly. Then it was with the clear proviso that he could come forward if there was the least breath of suspicion against Buck's story.

"But theah ain't goin' to be any," said Buck. "I know wheah I'm at. But for Gawd's sake, Chet, stay off JW ground till you've got somethin' even Wallace can't deny for a excuse to come on it!"

He put the dead man on his horse and vanished in the gathering dark. Chet looked after him, feeling a queer mixture of emotions. Buck was loyal to Wallace, and also to Chet. Not many men would do what he was doing in taking a killing on himself, no matter how good an explanation they could offer.

"He says Wallace didn't arrange this," said Chet grimly. "Maybe he's right. I'm goin' to have a little talk with de Aviguez. I' got an idea it'd be a matter of good business to put the fear o' Gawd into him!"

CHAPTER VII

CHET rode into Alminas looking bleak and grim, at just the time of the morning when the first few figures began to appear in the streets of the town. He was still riding the dun horse, which looked tired and sleepy. He put that animal in the livery-stable and inconspicuously loosened his gun in its holster. He stalked rather formidably to the Alminas Café. It was just opening. The waitress took his order. Chet sat down where he could watch de Aviguez's office across the way.

His coffee and ham and eggs arrived. Chet had ordered them mainly as an excuse for using the café as a lurking-place, but he nibbled at them tentatively, and abruptly began to eat hungrily. He felt better but no more amiable when he had finished. He ordered another cup of coffee and lingered over it, watching the opposite side of the street.

The waitress looked at him uncertainly. Chet ignored her. She looked at him again. Presently she came to his table.

"You know Mr. Enderby, don't you?" she asked uncertainly.

"Buck Enderby?" Chet raised his eyes. "Yes, ma'm. I know him."

"Is he—has anything happened to him? He hasn't been in town for a week. We are—quite good friends."

Chet's face softened.

"I'll tell you, ma'm," he said somberly. "He's been busy. He's the best friend I got. An' he's been busy tryin' to keep somebody else from killin' me, an' me from killin' somebody else. It's not his fault he's stayed away."

The waitress hesitated and turned away.

"I—uh—I might see him today," said Chet. "Will I tell him you asked about him?"

"N-no . . . Yes!"

She fled suddenly. Chet scowled to himself. His troubles were messing up Buck in more ways than one.

De Aviguez came rather pompously into view. Chet stood up and left the money for his breakfast. He went purposefully across the street and stood by the door of de Aviguez's office. He turned partly away from the direction from which de Aviguez would come. He waited there, his face grim.

Footsteps behind him. They came close. A shadow fell upon him as de Aviguez turned to enter his own office. He peered inquisitively up to see who waited to speak to him. He saw Chet.

For one instant pure panic distorted his features. He gasped. He went a deathly white, and his eyes contracted to pinpoints.

Then he became the suave and composed gentleman again, only a little more pale than usual, beaming at Chet.

"Ah, my friend Mr. Holliday!" he said cordially. He put his key in the office-door lock. It clattered. "Come in! I had a note from you yesterday. It puzzled me. I'm afraid you still think badly of me—"

Here he opened the door and laughed a little.

"—but I can hardly blame you, since my first mistaken interference in your affairs. Come in! Here, into the inner office. Sit down!"

Chet was deliberately and ominously silent. De Aviguez opened his desk. He hung up his hat. He settled himself at ease, rubbing his hands cheerfully. But he was still very pale.

"Now, what can I do for you? The—er—ill-feeling your note mentioned as directed against the Hanks; it has vanished?"

"It'd vanished when I wrote that note," said Chet drily. "I talked to the first man that pulled that no-sellin' stuff."

"What did he say?" asked de Aviguez interestedly.

"He didn't talk much," said Chet. "His tonsils hurt. My gun-sight had prob'ly scratched 'em. I rammed a gun down his throat to kinda—uh—emphasize my remarks."

De Aviguez blinked. Then he laughed.

"But, my dear Mr. Holliday!" he protested. "After all, I'm the county prosecutor! You could be charged with assault! Let's hope the man ignores the matter."

"He will." Again Chet's tone was dry. "I didn't come down heah on that account."

"What did you come for?"

"Several things. To buy me some more gun-shells, for one thing. I' done some target practice lately." Chet's voice was dry indeed. De Aviguez started visibly. "What I want from you, though," he added, "is a kinda statement that as county prosecutor, you have informed me that I've got a right to go to my mine. It turns out it's on JW land. Wallace is set on keepin' me off his ranch, but I've got a legal assignment of mineral rights an' I want to open up that mine. So, natural, I'd like some kinda paper to show the line-rider Wallace has on the job to keep me off. I don't like gunplay. I hope I don't have any—more."

THE last word was added very, very deliberately. Very significantly. De Aviguez flinched. But he did not dare ask for an explanation. Chet believed de Aviguez had hired a man to kill him, the day before. He couldn't prove it, and anyhow Buck had explained the dead killer by saying he'd been shot at and shot back. Now Chet was rather definitely hinting at untoward events in which he'd been involved.

"Uh—will you give me such a letter?" asked Chet.

"Y-yes. Of course." But de Aviguez made no move. "I—er—I have looked up the deeds you recorded and verified the statements you made the other day: It looks like a very good gamble you're making."

"It's not a gamble," said Chet. "I know what I'm doin'."

"Yes? But—er—wouldn't you rather make your stake more easily? Sell me the mine? I'm just convinced enough to risk a good sum."

"Rather take the chance myself," said Chet briefly.

"Say—even five thousand?"

"I'll take the letter," said Chet. "Of course I can go to Wallace himself an' have a show-down."

All unconsciously, de Aviguez shuddered. He swung around in his chair. He scribbled. The pen scratched horribly, and the reason was clear when Chet glanced at the letter. It was almost illegible. It looked as if de Aviguez's hand had shaken uncontrollably.

Chet stood up and waved it negligently to dry it.

"I'm gettin' right curious," he observed, "about why folks dislike me so much. Did you heah about that happenin' up on JW ground yesterday?"

De Aviguez shook his head, wordless.

"'Was a fella," said Chet casually, "layin' for me. Intendin' to dry-gulch me. But he—uh—mistook somebody else for me."

The knuckles of de Aviguez's hand showed pale. His face could not whiten any more.

"He's dead," said Chet. "He talked right interestin' before he died."

Then he smiled very faintly, nodded and went out. His last statement, of course, was not true. But if de Aviguez had sent a man to kill Chet, that lie was enough to suggest that something very unfortunate for him had happened, and Chet hadn't told him what.

Chet went out and got his horse, grimly satisfied that he'd scared de Aviguez badly. He headed back for the squatter's shack where he would pick up his rope and blocks again. He went over the whole situation in his mind once more. As nearly as he could estimate, simply wanting to get hold of the mine for himself was an adequate motive for everything de Aviguez had done.

Chet had asked 'Bijah Hanks a great many questions, the night before. Everything he knew about de Aviguez. Everything he'd ever heard, from instances of notorious greed to hinted tales of de Aviguez's favorite form of amusement, which was rather horrible. Chet did not know the technical term for pleasure gained by inflicting pain, but he knew some people experienced it. De Aviguez was one of them.

Decidedly, if all Hanks' tales were true, de Aviguez would suffer acutely from the thought of anyone else stepping in and making a fortune under his nose. And Chet dubiously put the whole thing down to that.

He reached the shack. Carol was waiting uneasily. Hanks had been entertaining her with mournful tales of persecution, which bored her, and a lurid account of how Chet had ended the nearest storekeeper's refusal to sell to him. That did not bore her. And Lisbeth lingered nearby, casting looks of bitter hatred. Carol greeted Chet with relief.

"You're—not going to ride Typhoon this morning, are you?" she asked appealingly.

"No. Goin' up to the mine," said Chet. "Ride along?"

"Yes, I'd be glad to."

"I'll get the stuff I'm takin' up."

Chet went in the house and again gathered up the rope and blocks. He just had them in hand when Lisbeth faced him. She was white and desperate and very pitifully young.

"Chet," she cried bitterly, "you ain't goin' to—" She choked a little. "You ain't goin' to—uh—kiss her, are you?"

"I'm going to work up at the mine," said Chet. "Please, Lisbeth! Don't act like a baby. You want me to go away from heah?"

"N—no. . . ."

"If you keep on actin' this way I won't have any choice!"

CHET turned the knob of the door. She beat her hands together.

"I hate her!" she cried. "You heah me? I goin' to get even with her for takin' you away from me! I'll get even!"

Chet shrugged unhappily. He opened the door and went out. He was frowning when he and Carol went loping up the dry stream-bed that led to the mine. She looked oddly at him.

"Chet."

"What, Carol?"

"I waited for you about half an hour. And Lisbeth, the girl there, you know. . . . She looked at me very queerly."

"Fool kid," said Chet. He would have felt idiotic to have to explain that Lisbeth had decided that she loved him, and was frantically jealous. "She takes it kinda hard, the trouble her folks've been havin' lately."

Carol's brow cleared.

"I was silly! I thought—" She smiled at Chet. "—I thought she might be jealous of me! But I wanted to ask about last night. Buck came back to the ranch with a man he said had tried to kill him."

Chet told her exactly what had happened, including Buck's insistence that he could get away with a killing in self-defense where Chet couldn't. Carol listened anxiously.

"But, Chet—"

"As long as Buck's all right," he told her, "everything's all set. I hadda talk with de Aviguez a little while back, an' I think I put the fear o' Gawd in him."

He told her about that, too. They rode together toward the higher mountain-levels, while distant peaks appeared and disappeared among the trees, and the horses climbed at their leisure. It was romantic enough, as scenery, but Carol frowned uneasily.

Then Buck appeared before them in the trail.

"Mornin'," he said drily. "I'm still on the job, Chet, to keep you off the JW."

"I got a passport." He produced the letter from de Aviguez. "Take a look at that. Don't it let you out?"

Buck read it and sighed in relief.

"Looks like it does. Uh—Miss Carol, would you read this an' tell me what you think about it?"

Carol read hastily.

"Of course. You can't stop him now, Buck. Uncle wasn't trying to keep Chet from his mine, anyhow. Just from coming—where I am." She smiled. Then she said suddenly, "Buck, Uncle wants Chet to have his rights, of course, but no more. So, you just go along with Chet! You make sure he doesn't go anywhere but to his mine! You see? And—there'll be two of you. I'll take this note and tell Uncle I gave you orders to watch Chet. Isn't that a good idea?"

"Right good, ma'm," said Buck grimly. "I'd say it was just about the last thing Mistuh Wallace 'ud want. But I'll play."

"I'll go home right away and tell him," said Carol.

She rode close to Chet. Buck reined his horse around. When he looked again, Carol was waving from a hundred yards away. She vanished.

Chet urged his horse forward. Buck came somberly with him. They were not far from the mine, now.

"Friend of yours is worried, Buck," said Chet. "Waitress at the Alminas Café. Wants to see you."

"Yeah," said Buck. "I' been so dam' busy with the hell you raised, Chet, that I ain't had time to go down. She's right nice."

He went on. Chet rolled a cigarette, his eyes searching the ground warily before him as they rode. Buck said abruptly:

"Chet, theah's hell a-rollin'. I got away with that killin', o'course. Like I said I would. Wallace fair frothed at the mouth. He realized the fella was theah to get you, not me. But he cussed de Aviguez to a fare-you-well. An' Wallace says he wants to see you."

"I wouldn't have expected that," commented Chet mildly. "The last time we got together he wasn't exac'ly cordial."

"He wants to buy you out," grunted Buck. "He aims to get these mineral rights o' yours, no matter what he has to pay for them. An' then he aims to get you away from heah. He don't want your blood on his han's, he says. But by Gawd, Chet, he sure aims to get you outa Fighting Horse Valley! I think it's Miss Carol. He figures she's fallin' for you an' it's eatin' right through his innards. That man is goin' through hell, between hatin' you an' thinkin' of her. She's the only folks he's got, you know."

"It's right tough on him," conceded Chet with some resentment, "but I'm not to blame for somethin' my pa did."

"I don't know what the ruckus is an' I don't care," said Buck sourly. "Wallace's been right white, considerin' the way he feels. But how long he's goin' to keep on I don't know. I like the fella, Chet! But no man can hold out but so long with his innards on fire!"

"An' no man," said Chet grimly, "is goin' to give up the girl who's promised to marry him because one of her men-folks dislikes him resemblin' his parents. That's that! Heah's the mine."

THE dump-heap appeared, and the rotted framework of a tool-shed. Chet's work on the cave-in was noticeable, now. He pointed out to Buck that the moving of no more than four huge blocks and some smaller ones would make an opening big enough for a man to squeeze through, into the ancient drift. He hobbled the dun horse and began to cut down saplings to make a tripod for his block and fall.

Buck watched maybe five minutes. Then he helped. They got a tripod in place over the hole Chet had made in the caved-in rocks. Four-inch young trees, wedged in cracks, gave excellent purchase to the triple blocks suspended from their center. Chet climbed down, looped a rope about a jagged stone he could not handle alone, and climbed up. He and Buck hauled away. The stone came swinging up. They snubbed the fall-rope, pulled the stone to one side, and let it down.

It was the matter of less than an hour to get down to the ragged, curved top of the drift. Cold dankness seemed to emanate from it. Three small jagged rocks. Another big block. More small ones.

"I think I can wriggle in theah now," said Chet. "I got a candle in my pocket. I'll take a rock to knock off some samples with, an' then I'll know what I'm doin'."

Buck nodded, Chet scrambled down.

It was close work, getting through the

hole they'd made. The cave-in had been remarkably complete. Squirming down, feeling with his feet in the darkness at first and then watching the irregular small hole which led to brightness without, Chet suddenly realized the number of small stones in the débris. An ordinary cave-in is usually a forcible settlement of huge blocks of stone, rarely their fragmentation. When Chet stood on the bottom of the drift and lighted his candle, he could see that the roof of the tunnel was shattered. There were too many pieces of rock lying loose.

"Funny!" he commented, staring about.

He stumbled over something. A rusty bit of handcar rail, leading inward. He picked up a bit of stone to peck at the drift-end with. He walked slowly toward the inside of the mountain.

The drift was a long one. Fifty feet. Sixty. A hundred. It turned, suddenly, and he scanned the walls for the reason. He saw. It was typical low-grade ore-formation and he grunted in satisfaction. He could see that the drift went on for fifteen or twenty feet further. He stooped to wedge his candle in place while he knocked off the samples which would prove his idea or disprove it altogether.

But he did not wedge the candle there. Not then, or at any other time. The candle, lowered to the floor, showed something lying there. Cloth, moldy and rotted. . . .

Buck called to him just as he was working his way up to the bottom of the pit they'd made in the cave-in.

"Comin'," said Chet from the bowels of the earth.

His head appeared, and then his face He squirmed out of the tiny opening and stood up. His face was very pale.

"We' goin' to close up this hole, Buck," he said quietly. "Let's roll down some of those big stones to fill this openin'. So no—uh—fox or coyote can get in."

Buck stared.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Y'as white as a sheet!"

"Am I?" Then Chet said more quietly than before, "Let's get this hole filled up, Buck, I mean it! Theah' two skeletons down in theah. Can't tell much about 'em, but theah's a rusty knife stickin' in the back of one of 'em."

Buck gaped at him. Chet said sardonically:

"I wonder!"

Buck came to life.

"Hell no!" he said stoutly. "In the back, y'said? We' friends, Chet, but that ain't why Wallace wants you outa his sight! Not in the back!"

CHAPTER VIII

BUCK smoked morosely as Chet took down the block and fall. It was the hottest part of the afternoon, now, but Chet looked as if he felt rather chilly. He blocked up the opening very carefully and climbed out of the pit.

"The whole thing depen's," said Buck gloomily, "on how long they' been in theah. How long'd you say, Chet?"

"I'm not exac'ly an expert on that sort of thing," said Chet composedly. "A right good while, though."

"Nothin' in theah pockets to tell who they were?"

"I didn't look," said Chet. "You figure it out, Buck. I go down in a caved-in tunnel. I start to put down my candle so I can knock loose some ore-samples from the wall. An' I find I'm puttin' my candle within a foot of a dead man's head."

"Somethin' like a shock," agreed Buck morosely. "Yeah."

"Another thing," Chet pointed out. "My little affair of yesterday. I'm not in what you'd call good odor around heah. I've got to watch my step. I figured I'd better leave the—uh—evidence undisturbed."

"Hell! It musta happened a long while ago!"

"Maybe," said Chet. "How long since the drift caved in?"

"Gawd knows! I don't. By the look of things, right long."

"Jake Henniger talks a lot about Fate," said Chet irrelevantly. "I wonder what he'd say about this?"

He hauled the three logs of his tripod out of sight and came back.

"I'll go down to Alminas an' tell about it. I suppose I'll have to come back with de Aviguez an' the Sheriff an' show them the works."

"Mmh! Let me do that, Chet. You scared de Aviguez near to death this mornin', anyway. You stay away from him a while. He'll be scared more. I'll go down an' report as a kinda unofficial observer. An' I wouldn't mind a chance to stop in the Alminas Café. I ain't got a bit of a chance to get away, else."

Chet saw the point.

"All right. If you snatch a minute to talk to her while you' in town on business, she won't find it so hard to believe you' been so busy you couldn't come before."

Then Buck said abruptly:

"Why'd you take down that block an' fall, Chet?"

Chet shrugged.

"I don't know. Just a hunch. In case what I found has a connection with the hell-raisin' that's been goin' on."

"Y'think that?"

"Hell, no! It's too dam' improbable! But just in case. An'—uh—Buck, d'you mind mailin' off some samples for me?"

"You got 'em anyways?" demanded Buck, wide-eyed.

"That was what I went down for," said Chet.

Buck grunted and caught his horse. He rode with Chet to the Hanks' house, though it was a little out of his way. When it came in sight he said meditatively:

"Hell of a way for folks to live."

"Hell for a kind of folks live heah," said Chet. "I owe 'em something. Plenty. If I make anything out of that mine, Hanks aims to collect."

"If de Aviguez an' the Sheriff go up to the mine today, do you want to come along? Chances are they will."

"I'll be round heah if they want me," said Chet curtly. "I'll prob'ly be down at the corral havin' a scrap with Typhoon."

Buck rode away. Chet headed for the corral, not going in the house at all. He unsaddled the dun and turned it in. Typhoon regarded him warily.

Chet was in a mood which called for action. There were things vaguely in his mind which would neither leave him alone nor present themselves intelligibly. Wallace. De Aviguez. The mine. The Sheriff. Those two skeletons.

Not wanting to touch them, Chet hadn't been able to examine them closely. That rusty knife, sticking out of the back of one of them. . . . It had made him sick. He knew there were two, but he'd barely more than made sure there was a second, partly underneath the first. Then he'd gotten his samples and come above-ground.

HE wanted, especially, to get that ghastly picture out of his mind. Wherefore he closed the corral gate behind him and the rope swished swiftly out of his hand and landed accurately, first cast, about Typhoon's neck.

There was a difference in his actions from the first second. Typhoon was taken by surprise. Chet subdued him for saddling. He saddled him. He was business-like. He needed action. Typhoon would give it to him. He mounted.

Typhoon did give him action, but it was not his best at first. Usually Chet coaxed him, however firmly his action bespoke authority. Today he treated Typhoon exactly like any other refractory horse. He roped him, saddled him, and climbed aboard in the bronc buster's easy motion which is so smooth that a horse actually cannot feel a pull on the cinches.

For a moment or two Typhoon behaved as if he were dumb-founded. All unconsciously Chet had been in a fair way to spoil his horse as a high-spirited child is sometimes spoiled. Too much tolerance, too painstaking a fairness, is almost as bad as not enough. Up to today, without knowing it, Chet had been building up a picture of their daily battles as sporting events; combats in which each put forth the utmost of strength and skill, but which were not in themselves matters of life and death. It was a mistake. He'd liked Typhoon a little bit too well, and some of the horse's pride was turning to vanity.

Chet's actions today hurt that vanity. For the space of three heart-beats the big horse stood dazedly still. Then from sheer force of habit he began to fight. But bewilderment hampered him. Chet stood the spine-shattering bucks, the pin-wheel spins, the crow-hops alternating with dizzy gyrations. But he expected more from Typhoon. Today, he needed more.

He spoke to the horse. And whereas before his tone had always been friendly, cheerfully personal, the tone of one sportsman addressing his antagonist, today it was otherwise. His tone was urgent, scathing. Without derision, which Typhoon would have been quick to catch, Chet snapped at him. Without anger which would have been a weakness, he made Typhoon feel that he was rebuked for the very battling which before had earned him admiration. And that rebuke roused Typhoon as he had never been roused before.

Then he began to fight. And he fought! For half an hour, for three-quarters, the small corral was the scene of such a battle

as would have made a rodeo audience go wild. Any three minutes of it would have been enough for a horseman to talk of for months afterward. The horse was a whirlwind. He was a dizzying, inspired tornado of horseflesh. He was all muscle and wire and dynamite, set off and controlled by brains and inspired by a desperate determination which at first was vanity, and then was pride, and then was the desperate, unconquerable courage of the best of his race. He was gasping for breath; starved for oxygen; sick with exhaustion. But still he fought on. It was such courage and such will as makes a thoroughbred run until he drops dead. It was such magnificent resolution as men make epics of, when it is displayed by animals with two legs instead of four.

Chet was a leech. At first he rode with a cold efficiency. Then, as Typhoon became his most deadly, he forgot the haunting things which had made him cold. He rode with every ounce of skill he possessed, forecasting the horse's next move with the uncanny precision of the swordsman or of the artist of his own craft. At the end he was hot with triumph. He had never ridden like that before. Typhoon had never fought like that before.

Then he realized Typhoon's condition. They'd had plenty of fights, but not like this. Before, their conflicts had been sporting events. This time Typhoon would fight until he dropped dead rather than admit defeat. He gasped as he bucked. He staggered between his most desperate leaps. Typhoon was no longer fighting with his body. That was worn out. He was fighting with his spirit alone, and he would stop only when that spirit left him. Because Typhoon had been rebuked.

And Chet dismounted.

Between two unspeakably pitiful, exhausted bucks he slipped from the dazed and staggering horse's back, and Typhoon went on fighting, too utterly worn out to know anything but that he must and would continue to fight until he died.

"Whoa, fella," said Chet quietly. "I'm off! I quit! You win! If I never break you, fella, I won't try to ride you another secon'."

Slowly, Typhoon seemed to come to himself. Chet unsaddled him where he stood and dropped the saddle and blanket in the dust. They didn't matter. The thing that did matter was Typhoon. And Chet worked over him as if he'd been a sick child.

HE walked him, coaxing, to cool him off. He rubbed him, and walked him again. When at last the big horse could safely be left alone, Chet took off the bridle. He gathered up his saddle.

Typhoon turned his head and stared at him. He was utterly spent. But he turned level, defiant eyes upon Chet. He was yet unbeaten.

"Damn!" said Chet somberly. "I wish y'were a man! I'd like t' shake han's with you."

He moved toward the corral gate, and only then became aware of the shaking-up he'd gotten. Then he saw Carol.

"Chet! What's happened?"

"Typhoon's licked me," said Chet quietly. "I rode him. Theah never was a horse since time began that put up the fight he put up. An' I never rode in all my born days like I rode just now. But he licked me. I could ride him to death, but I couldn't lick him, an' when I realized it—why—he'd licked me! An' I—dammit, Carol, I could kiss him for it! Theah never was another horse like him! Never!"

Chet tried to smile, but it was not a success. Carol put her arm on his.

"What' you' doin' heah?" he asked wearily.

"Buck. Where is he?"

"He went down to Alminas. What's the matter?"

"Uncle is—frantic, Chet! I—I'm so glad you didn't open up the mine!"

Chet looked at her sharply.

"What's that? Why d'you say that?"

"I—went home," she told him. "I showed him Mr. de Aviguez's letter. And I—I thought for a moment I'd killed him! He sent me back. To find you and Buck. To stop you if—if it looked like you were going in the mine. I promised to stop you somehow. Anyhow! Not to let you know why. If you'd seen Uncle's face—Chet!"

Chet said quietly:

"I did go down in the mine."

"But— Why do you look so queer?"

"Theah were two skeletons in the mine, Carol. Killed a long while back. It was pretty clear to see they'd been murdered."

"But I looked! Where you were working! You couldn't get in!"

"Buck an' me, we rolled rocks down again to seal it up," said Chet. "He's gone

on down to Alminas to tell de Aviguez an' the Sheriff."

She stared bewilderedly at him, and a sudden look as of terrified enlightenment swept across her face. Then she said fiercely:

"I don't—I can't believe that's why Uncle didn't want the mine opened! I don't believe it! I know him!"

"Go on, Carol," he said quietly. "Tell me the rest of it."

"He said—he said he was going to try to buy the mine from you. But if you won't sell, he told me not to worry for fear he'd try to get even. The only thing was that he insisted that somehow I—I must keep you from going in the mine today!"

"Buck's gone down to tell de Aviguez about it," repeated Chet grimly. "I can't stop that!"

"But, Chet! Listen to me! I don't understand all this! I don't know anything! Not even why Uncle hates you! But I know him! He wouldn't murder anyone! And yet—he's nearly crazy! Chet! If you love me, will you do something for me?"

"Anything, Carol. You know that."

"Don't—don't let them go up in the mine today! Please! For me!"

"I reg'n I can stop them," said Chet. "All right. I will. An' what else?"

"Don't—don't tell anyone what you found! I don't understand it, Chet, but I can't believe Uncle's a murderer! He's—decent, Chet!"

"Unless de Aviguez spreads the news, I don't think it ought to leak out," said Chet. "An' from the way I figure him, he might blackmail y'uncle, but I don't think he'd feel any almighty sense of duty urgin' him to take legal action."

"I'll go back," said Carol swiftly. "I'll let Uncle think you didn't get in. I'll see Buck when he comes."

SHE pressed close to him and kissed him. Then she was a waving figure on a flying horse.

Chet went wearily back to the house. As he went, he meditated unpleasantly. He came out and scanned the landscape. A little later he was walking toward a rocky knob about a quarter of a mile away. He looked keenly, from there.

"Only two ways up to the mine," he said frowning, mentally surveying the map he'd had. "Both of 'em in clear sight from heah. I'll see Buck an' the others in plenty of time to saddle up an' meet 'em."

He sat down and rolled a cigarette. Squatted alone, breathing fragrant smoke through his nostrils, Chet lost some of the disturbance which had begun with the discovery in the mine and increased with the hopelessness of winning Typhoon and the news Carol brought.

Then he heard a sound nearby. He turned. And it was Lisbeth. She held her father's rifle bearing unsteadily upon him. Chet sat still. A woman with a gun is more dangerous than a man. A man shoots straighter, as a rule, but he doesn't pull the trigger without intending it. A woman may.

He looked at Lisbeth. She was deathly white. Her eyes flamed. The gun muzzle wavered. It wavered. . . .

Then, suddenly, she threw down the weapon and ran away, sobbing.

Chet sat still a little while longer. He knew what had happened, of course. She'd seen Carol kiss him. And she'd come out to shoot him, to kill him so nobody else could have him. But no woman can shoot a man in the back if she loves him or hates him. She wants him to know who killed him.

"I reg'n," said Chet without humor, "this heah's gone far enough. But maybe she'll come back to her senses now."

He picked up the rifle and sat with it across his knees for a very long time. The sun set and deep shadows gathered in the valley and welled up between the hills. Darkness came. Then Chet got up rather stiffly. Carrying the rifle, he went back to the shack.

Chet went in and put the rifle in a corner.

He went out again. He found Typhoon grazing more or less contentedly, still tired—of course!—but safely past any danger of bad consequences from his terrific fight. And Chet sat there in the darkness and talked to him. The big horse lingered near him, sometimes cropping at the grass, sometimes apparently only resting. But there was light enough from the stars for Chet to see his ears prick up presently.

A horse came pounding toward the shack. Whoever was on it was hurrying. Chet raised his voice in a shout which carried through the still night. The horse swerved. It came on at a reckless run.

"Chet!" It was Carol again, breathless and anxious. "Have you heard anything from Buck?"

"No. They didn't come up to go to the mine. What's the matter?"

"Uncle wanted Buck," said Carol. "He—said he needed Buck badly. I said he'd gone down to Alminas. And Uncle used the telephone, trying to reach him. There's no trace of him, anywhere. I—I called up Mr. de Aviguez privately. And he says Buck never got to him. Uncle needs him! And—I'm worried! He started for Alminas! He never got there!"

"Now I wonder," said Chet harshly, "if somebody believed that story of his about bumpin' that fella off yesterday! An' decided to get even!"

CHAPTER IX

THE two of them stood staring at each other in the darkness.

"Buck might be bumped off," said Chet. He was very quiet. "He might be, by somebody gettin' even for the fella he said he killed yesterday. Or de Aviguez might've done something because Buck told him about what I found in the mine today an' he don't want that to go any further. Which would mean somebody comin' up heah after me, presently. But it's possible. . . . Yeah. Why, Carol, it's right likely that the waitress in the Alminas Café is the answer. Buck was kinda sweet on her. He mighta stopped to talk to her an' got such a welcome he forgot everything else."

"I—hope it's that," said Carol constrainedly. "I—like Buck. But what can I do about Uncle? What shall I tell him?"

"Call up the restaurant when you get back," said Chet. "Try that way of locating Buck. If y'still don't find him, figure out some way of tellin' your uncle I won't be goin' in the mine tomorrow, since he don't know I was in theah today."

"But—why do you say that, Chet?" she demanded pitifully. "You don't think he wants Buck—"

"To help him get in the mine an' help him move those two bodies I found? Yeah, I believe it. And so do you."

"I c-can't believe it, Chet! It would mean he'd murdered them! And Uncle . . . He wouldn't murder anybody!"

Chet shrugged.

"What I'm hopin'," he said harshly, "is that nobody's murdered Buck! "

"I'm to tell Uncle that you're not going near the mine tomorrow," said Carol. She stammered a little. "You—think he just wanted to move those—people so nobody would ever find them, and that he wants Buck because he'd trust Buck to help."

"That's it."

"You're—wrong. You must be! But it's decent of you, Chet, to promise to stay away."

"Doin' it for you, not him," said Chet briefly. "I'm riding back with you an' then goin' to hunt up Buck. Wait a minute till I get my stuff."

He headed for the house. Hanks snored on the porch. Chet picked up his saddlery from its place inside the door, and went out of the house again. Carol was leaning against the corral fence when he went back.

"Right with you," said Chet.

He darted the loop to the dun horse's neck. In seconds, it seemed, he was mounted. They moved off together through the moonlight.

"We stay off the regular trail," said Chet curtly. "Theah's still a chance that Buck is all right. The waitress in the café down in town asked me about him early this mornin'. So when you get home, I'll come straight back heah. He might have come back to report to me by then. If he's not heah, I'll go on down to Alminas an' check on him."

Carol nodded. They pressed on, through the alternating darknesses and moonlit spaces among the trees. Chet seemed to have some inner urge to hurry. Twice Carol turned her face—oval and very sober in the moonlight—to look at him. The third time she said:

"But—Chet, I don't think Uncle could possibly have what you think, on his mind. He— isn't the sort of person to murder anyone."

"I'm not accusin' him."

"But you think he did!"

Chet did not answer. There was no need. It was too complete a case. If Wallace wanted to prevent the mine's being entered for just one day, and wanted the one man he trusted most that night, and there were two dead bodies down in that mine, the logical explanation was that he knew the bodies were there, and wanted the one man he trusted to help him get

them out and safely hidden somewhere else.

The two horses went on through the moonlight. There was no sound but the creaking of leather and the thudding of horses' hoofs.

"You said we'd stay away from the regular trail home, Chet. Why?"

"Your uncle may not be the only one intendin' to go in that mine tonight," said Chet grimly. "De Aviguez knows now what I found. Buck told him. Maybe *he* intends to go in theah tonight. I'm takin' you a roundabout way in case he put somebody to keep me from interferin'. We won't meet anybody, this way."

Carol rode in silence. Then:

"But Uncle . . . If Mr. de Aviguez goes in there . . ."

"Want me to guard it against everybody but Wallace?" asked Chet. "I've got to think some about Buck!"

THEY came out upon open ground. High, rolling country, this. Far away, lights twinkled in the JW ranch house. Carol reined in.

"I'll go on alone, Chet. You—try to find Buck. I'm—worried. I'm such a nuisance! Making you do all kinds of things for someone who hates you, just because I'm sorry for him!"

"An' I'm makin' you do all sorts of things," said Chet quietly, "to hurt somebody who loves you. I guess it's even."

He smiled rather queerly at her. She tilted up her face to be kissed, and then pressed close as his arm went about her.

"We' two queer folks," he told her gruffly. "We'll get along."

Then he sat watching as her sleek horse trotted away toward the ranch house he must not enter. When she was out of sight he turned away. And, riding back to the Hanks, he thought grim thoughts about the white-haired, desperate man in that ranch house. Murder somewhere in his past. He'd hidden his victims where they'd be utterly, utterly safe. Then Chet had turned up to disclose them. . . .

It was a ride of an hour at least from the JW ranch house to the Hanks.

He came to a spot from which the Hanks' shack was visible, still a long distance away, but notable because of lamplight showing through windows. That yellow glimmer caught his eye. Then he thought he saw something else. The moonlight was vivid. But the distance was too great. If he actually saw something moving, some dark mass before the door, the light was yet too faint and the house too far for him to be sure of it.

"Mmmh!" he reflected. "If that's Buck, he'll hang around to tell me what he found out. They know wheah I went an' he'll know I'm comin' back."

He hastened a little. But there were two minor ravines and a long steep hillside to negotiate. It was more than half an hour before he rode up to the shack. Then the space before it was empty. The door stood open, and 'Bijah Hanks moved nervously about, complaining bitterly to himself in a whining monotone.

Chet dropped the dun horse's reins over his head and went in. Tommy Hanks was up again, rubbing his eyes as he gazed fearfully at his father. He stared awedly at Chet when he came in.

"Did y'shoot 'em, Chet?" he asked shrilly. "Did y'git all of 'em? You' goin' to be a outlaw now?"

"Huh? What's this?" demanded Chet. "What y'talkin' about?"

Hanks stared unbelievingly at him.

"M-my Gawd, Chet! D-didn't you see the Sheriff?" he asked through suddenly chattering teeth. "He was heah with two deputies, lookin' for you!"

Chet stared.

"The Sheriff? Lookin' for me? Wasn't Buck Enderby with him?"

"N-no." Hanks knees trembled. He sat down abruptly. "They was lookin' for you. They hunted high an' low. Lisbeth, she told 'em you was gone to the JW. I wouldn't ha' told 'em, Chet! I wouldn't ha' give you away!"

Chet shrugged.

"No need to get excited," he said shortly. "Buck prob'ly told the Sheriff I was waitin' heah."

"They—they come in with theah guns out," chattered Hanks. "They'd s'rrounded the house first, Chet! They wanted to 'rest you. They wouldn't believe you was away. Strangers, those deputies. They tried to take Typhoon, but he fit 'em."

"What's that?" Chet raged, suddenly. He plunged out of the house and ran down to the corral. But the big horse was still there. As Chet came racing to the gate and through it, Typhoon was nosing curiously at a heap of something on the

ground. "You theah, Typhoon!" said Chet brittily. "What's that you nosin'?"

For an instant it looked like the crumpled figure of a man. But it was too small. Chet bent over and fingered it. It was grass, green and sweet-smelling, and freshly plucked. He stood up, breathing quickly in his relief, twisting the green stalks unconsciously between his fingers.

"You fought 'em, fella?" he said harshly. "Good for you! Theah's somethin' mighty funny goin' on around heah! Buck missin' an' the Sheriff tryin' to take my horse, an' bustin' in after me with guns already pulled. . . ."

He stopped short. Something stung his finger. It was not a thorn. It did not hang in the flesh. It was the curiously acute sharp sting of something very keen and deadly. Chet went cold. He found the sharp edge with his fingers. It felt like a sliver of glass. He felt other granular sandy particles. Another sharp sting.

His hands shaking, Chet knelt down and struck a match. By the wavering light he saw little glistening bits of dust among the grass-blades. Slivers. Splinters. He stood up and threw the match away, swearing in a choked voice. He was so completely enraged that he reached for his gun when a figure appeared ten feet away.

"I guess you dodged 'em," said Lisbeth bitterly in the darkness. "It ain't my fault! I told 'em wheah you was! I tried to help 'em get you!"

A pause.

"YOU— Which o' those coyotes tried to feed Typhoon powdered glass when they couldn't catch him or take him away?"

"I done it!" said Lisbeth, bitterly triumphant. "You like that horse more'n you do me! If I'd hadda chance to pizen Carol Bradley I'd ha' done that too!"

Chet took two steps toward her before he got control of himself. She did not flinch or turn to flee.

"Come on!" she cried desperately. "If y'want to kill me, go ahead! D'you think I care about livin' when y'—when y'—"

She sobbed. Chet's hands closed and unclosed. He went up to Typhoon and the big horse let him approach. Somehow, since the drawn battle of that morning, the most bitterly contested fight of them all, Typhoon did not seem to resent Chet's approach. It looked as if he realized that it was Chet who had surrendered since he was unable to conquer and unwilling to kill.

"Fella," said Chet, his voice very strange. "We' movin' away from heah. Come along."

Rather incredibly, the yellow horse let himself be led by a strand of his mane. Out of the corral. Up to the house. Chet put a halter on him with shaking hands. He fastened a lead-rope to the dun horse's saddle.

He went in the house and got his few possessions. He came out again. Hanks stood eyeing him nervously, his hands and his whole body twitching.

"What y'goin' to do, Chet?" he asked miserably. "Y'goin' away? What' they huntin' you for?"

"Gawd knows!" said Chet savagely. "I'm leavin'. Lisbeth tried to poison Typhoon. Y'won't be seein' me again, I reg'n."

'Bijah Hanks whined.

"But, Chet! We ain't got any friends! Everybody's against a poor man! Cain't you spare somethin' to help us along. . . ."

"Hell!" said Chet. He owed this man much. He flung down bills on the floor. Practically all the money he had left. "I'm guessin' you'd better get outa the Valley," he said harshly. "I can't help you any more. Hell's poppin' an' I think I begin to understand it! So long!"

Outside again. Into the saddle. He went swiftly away into the darkness, physically nauseated by the turmoil of his emotions. "A hell of a place," said Chet between his teeth, "this Fightin' Horse Valley! An' I'm guessin' de Aviguez is the boss devil, with Wallace— Heah! What'm I doin'?"

He was heading for Alminas, because it was in Alminas that Buck had disappeared. He drew rein, and Typhoon crowded close only to shy away again to the end of his lead-rope. Chet had to think, and think straight. The Sheriff was looking for him with two deputies with drawn guns. Why? For the same reason that had caused Buck's disappearance. The discovery of two skeletons deep in the caved-in mine. What did it all mean? That he'd disappear as Buck had done. Wallace would be glad of it, and de Aviguez. . . .

"Wallace wantin' to get in the mine tonight," said Chet coldly. "Buck grabbed off an' a try made at grabbin' me. I'm guessin' de Aviguez will be headin' for that

mine, too. He prob'ly knows what it's all about an' he's goin' to protect Wallace or else hold him up. An' I reg'n it's up to me to do a little grabbin' myself an' find out what happened to Buck. De Aviguez knows!"

He swung about and headed swiftly for the hills. In the wooded hillsides of Fighting Horse Valley there was room for regiments to maneuver unseen. For one man on one horse, with another horse trailing him, the evasion of possible watchers was simplicity itself.

"If he's alone, it's goin' to take him hours to get in theah," said Chet, his voice filled with blood-lust. "I got time!"

He found a hiding-place for his horses. He went forward on foot, moving silently through the moonlight-speckled forests, clambering over bald knobs of rock and at the end skirting the edge of that ledge on which lush grass grew, just below the dump-heap of the abandoned mine.

At the last, he used some stealth. He saw a tethered horse and savage satisfaction filled him. Then he heard voices. One voice raged, trembling. Another voice purred a reply.

Then Chet arose beside the speakers, apparently from the ground. The moonlight glinted on the barrel of his six-gun. He stepped forward and said with a savage bitterness:

"Now theah three of us, three minds with but a single thought, an' a hell of a thought it is!"

THE moonlight shone down very brightly upon the pit Chet had made above the collapsed mine-drift. There was a sharply-slanting mountainside, and a space of broken, tumbled rock. A pit perhaps eight feet deep in a mass of shattered granite. And there were already two men facing each other across that pit, and Chet's rasped greeting turned their heads in frozen astonishment to him.

Wallace cried out harshly. De Aviguez was shorter and nearly bald. Rolls of fat about his shoulders emphasized his gnome-like aspect among the broken stones.

"We' all heah," said Chet, his tone deadly cold. "Mistuh de Aviguez, you sent your Sheriff to get hold o' me tonight. He missed me. But I reg'n Mistuh Wallace an' me are goin' to join in askin' you what the hell have you done with Buck Enderby! He started down to Alminas to see you! He had right much to say to you, an' now he's missin'. I suspect he's dead. What'd you do to him?"

Wallace snapped hoarsely at Chet:

"Buck went to see this—rat? And he's missing?"

"He did. He is," said Chet coldly. "An' I aim to find out what happened if I have to choke Mistuh de Aviguez—"

Wallace turned upon the small fat man, flaring hatred.

"What happened to Buck?" he cried fiercely. "If you hurt him in any of your damned scheming—"

De Aviguez squeaked wildly:

"Holliday's been down in the mine! He sent Enderby to tell me!"

Then something like a roar burst from Wallace. It seemed as if foam should fleck his lips.

"You've been down in the mine!" His voice became thick. "You—"

"Surely he's been in!" cried de Aviguez again. His eyes glittered. There was a gun in his hand, too. He looked swiftly from one to the other. "He found—"

Wallace tugged at his hip, mouthing fury inextricably mixed with anguish. De Aviguez grinned horribly. Crouching a little, he fixed beady eyes upon Chet. The two of them, Wallace and de Aviguez, would open fire together. . . .

"Sure I found somethin'!" Chet's finger was ready on the trigger. His muscles were infinitely ready. "An' Wallace knows what it is!"

Then de Aviguez squeaked. It was just that, a squeak, and nothing else. It was like the despairing cry of a rat who sees a club descending he is helpless to avoid. But de Aviguez whirled upon Wallace, his mouth open and gasping, the gun in his hand wavering from pure terror. . . .

Then a new voice seemed to change everything.

CHAPTER X

FIVE minutes later, Chet felt the blood still pounding in his temples. It still seemed impossible. He was dazed. Somebody should have gotten killed. There was every reason for each of the three of them to try to kill the other two. So it seemed, at any rate. Yet there was a little scuttling sound where de Aviguez fled away through the underbrush. Now Carol was sobbing quite impossibly in his arms, and

Wallace sat with his head in his hands on a broken rock, looking broken and old and utterly hopeless.

Chet said thickly:

"You shouldn't ha' let him do that! You shouldn't ha' come heah! He knows what happened to Buck! An' you made us let him get away!"

"I—had to stop you!" panted Carol. "I—got home, and Uncle had left just a little while before. They told me which way he'd gone. I—raced to catch up with him. I—heard his horse on rock. I—lost him. Then I came straight here and—I heard voices. I—wasn't sure who it was so I came cautiously. An you were—all three about to fight. I—had to stop it somehow, Chet!"

When she'd seen that gunplay was imminent, Carol had flung herself into the triangle made by the three who faced each other. Chet had seen the beastly light on de Aviguez's face. He had not dared open fire because he knew that like a cornered rat, de Aviguez would have fired first at Carol. Injury to her would have been the most terrible blow he could strike at either Chet or Wallace. Wallace doubtless, had felt the same paralyzing terror. De Aviguez had backed away and backed away, his gun leveled, looking more and more like some misshapen evil kobold, until he had dared to turn and scuttle frantically through the brush.

The sound of his going died away. Carol clung to Chet, panting. Wallace suddenly stood up. He faced Chet in the moonlight, and despair and hatred and heartbreak were inextricably mingled in his face and voice.

"You—you've been down in the mine," he said.

Chet put Carol aside.

"I have," he said harshly.

"What—" Wallace licked his lips. He could do no more than whisper. "What did you find?"

Chet regarded him in stony calm. A rusty knife sticking in the back of a man long dead. And Carol believed in Wallace!

"My God, man!" cried Wallace despairingly. "What did you find?"

Chet eyed him. Her uncle. She believed in him.

"Hell!" said Chet quietly. "Carol's heah. I'm not tellin' in her hearin'."

He turned his back and moved away. He heard Wallace make some sound he could not identify. Carol caught his arm in a firm grip.

"Chet! You can't go—like this!"

"Oh, yes!" he told her. "I've still got to find out about Buck. An' de Aviguez had a Sheriff an' a coupla deputies up this way a little while back. You get home, Carol. Fast! I saw him look at you jus' now. You go home an' take y'uncle. Do like I say!"

"But, Chet—"

He moved on, leaving her staring after him. A little later he heard the clatter of horses' hoofs. He looked back and saw them moving away.

Chet considered grimly. Buck. De Aviguez had told a lot when he said Buck had reported Chet's entry into the sealed-up mine. Add that to the attempt of the Sheriff to arrest Chet. Add de Aviguez's evident intention to get into the mine himself. Then add that squeaking, horrified terror when Chet had used the phrase, "W h a t Mistuh Wallace knows is—" —down in the mine. Terror. From the moment of Chet's first announced intention to open up the mine. Why was de Aviguez terrified when it was Wallace's crime? Why was Wallace in such anguish if it was de Aviguez's murder?

Chet could not pick up his trail. He thought he heard a single horse clattering away somewhere, but he could not locate it by the sound.

"Hell!" he said coldly. "This mullin' round don't do a dam' bit of good. My job right now is findin' out about Buck."

He went back to his own two horses. He headed down toward Alminas. True, the Sheriff had been looking for him, but Chet had not too great a respect for the Sheriff. And after tonight there was a rift between Wallace and de Aviguez. Each wanted to get in the mine. It looked like neither wanted the other to get in first. The two big men of the county at odds. They'd been ready to kill each other tonight.

IT had been late when the three-cornered duel was so narrowly averted at the mine. It was later when Chet passed somewhere near the squatter's shack. But it was early when Chet reached the broad floor of Fighting Horse Valley and moved steadily, with Typhoon trailing on his lead-rope, down toward the town of Alminas.

He went in openly. It did not occur to him to be secretive. He went into the little town before sunrise, when the sky had barely begun to pale to the east. A speculative glance at the Alminas Café. Closed. A second speculative glance at the jail. Silent. Chet made for Jake Henniger's house and knocked thunderously until Jake's frightened Mexican wife quavered an interrogation through the door, and then shook Jake into stunned wakefulness.

"I want some news," said Chet coldly. "Buck Enderby came heah in town yesterday afternoon."

"Yeah. *Seguro!* Sure he did! I saw him come in. I see most everything, Chet."

"Then what happened to him? He came down on a right important errand, an' he's missin'."

"I hadda hunch theah was somethin' important in his comin'," said Jake. "Yeah. I set theah on my doorstep an' seen him comin' in, an' I says to myself, 'That's Chet's frien', that is, ridin' in like he's got somethin' on his min'. Fate's a-workin'.' I like to watch the workin's of Fate, Chet. She moves this li'l thing this way, an' that thing happens that way, an' all of a sudden y'see all clear just what it was that Fate was a-workin' to bring about."

"I'm tryin' to find out what happened to Buck!" said Chet impatiently. "Wheah'd he go?"

"Right down the main street, Chet. He was scowlin' like he hadda lot on his min'. I didn't see wheah he went to. The houses hid him."

"Did y'see him ride out again?"

Jake Henniger shook his head.

"My *mujer* called me 'bout then, Chet. Was one of the kids run into the prickly-pear bush out back, playin' an' dodgin' with the others. I didn't get back to settin' an' thinkin' for a right long time after that."

"De Aviguez denied seein' him," said Chet harshly, "but Buck'd told him I'd been in the mine. Buck saw de Aviguez heah in town."

"*Que tal?* What's doin', Chet?" Jake asked it eagerly. "Somethin' turned up about the mine? I' been thinkin' things over, an' theah's treasure in theah, Chet! *Seguro!* Theah's treasure in theah an' it's meant for you! You musta heard about the—"

" 'Not interested in treasure right now," snapped Chet. "I want to know what happened to Buck."

"He come in town, Chet," said Jake raptly. "Yeah. He come in town. I can see it all. Fate's a-workin'. What was Buck comin' in town about, Chet?"

Chet opened his mouth. Then he closed it. Buck had gotten into trouble, at least, because he knew what was down in the mine. If Jake Henniger knew it. . . .

"I'd better not tell you, Jake," said Chet. "I'd better get movin', too. Talkin' to me might get you in trouble. I didn't think of that before. One more thing. How about jail? Could Buck've been put in jail without you knowin' it?"

Jake shook his head.

"My wife's got a cousin," he explained. "He sweeps out the jail for the Sheriff. He'd ha' told her, an' she'd ha' told me. No. Buck ain't in the jail. The two Hanks boys are the only fellas in jail right now. But ain't you goin' to tell me?"

"No," said Chet.

But Jake nodded more raptly than before.

"I got y', Chet! Wheah treasure's concerned, the tighter y' keep y'mouth shut the better. One stroke o' the pick an' the raw gold stickin' outa the wall! Yeah! Millions an' millions of it!"

Chet stood up abruptly.

"I'm goin' to get away from heah before sunrise," he said shortly, "before I'm noticed. If anybody suspec's I talked to you, you' better deny you saw me."

"I c'n keep my mouth shut," said Jake. "Yes, suh! You found millions. You' goin' to lay low till everything's set. You' right, Chet. I ain't goin' to say a word!"

His eyes were shining. Chet left him.

Outside, the two horses stamped in the cold dawn. Chet mounted the dun horse and rode away through the improbable pale light that now filled the world. He considered coldly. Some place to put his horses until he had a chance to talk to the waitress at the Alminas Café. No sense in being unduly conspicuous. The livery stable wasn't wise, perhaps, but—He shrugged. He woke a sleepy Mexican and made it entirely clear that his saddled horse wasn't to be unsaddled. The big yellow horse—the outlaw horse—was not to be touched. Even the lead-rope from his halter to the dun's saddle wasn't to be untied. A couple of silver half-dollars made assurance doubly sure.

HE went out into the street again. His gun was clear. Dawn-shadows began to make their appearance.

Somebody appeared in the street.

A negro came down the street and went in the back of the Alminas Café. Billowing smoke poured from its chimney. Chet rapped on the front door until the negro let him in.

"I'll want some breakfast, when y'ready," said Chet.

The negro went to the back again. The clatter of the stovelids. Fat hissed. Chet heard the slices of ham go in the frying-pan and even the breaking of the eggs.

He ate somberly. A tapping of heels, and the waitress opened the front door and came in. Chet nodded to her.

"I gave Buck y'message," he told her.

She even smiled at him.

"Thanks. He said you did."

Chet put down his coffee-cup.

"What happened to him?" he demanded. "He didn't get back to the JW las' night. An' he didn't come to tell me what happened down heah."

She flushed.

"Was he going to tell you? I—we're engaged."

Chet jumped.

"That—uh—wasn't what I was thinkin' of," he said slowly. "He came down on a right important errand."

"Yes. He had to tell Mr. de Aviguez something. He said he almost forgot it. When he left me he went over and saw Mr. de Aviguez, and a little later they all rode away together, he and Mr. de Aviguez and the Sheriff."

Chet's face went hard. Buck was missing, now. And the Sheriff had turned up with two deputies to arrest Chet. Hanks said the deputies were strangers to him. Strangers. . . . And Buck had said there were rumors of some dirty business going on, in which such men as the one who'd tried to dry-gulch Chet were useful. Smuggling, most likely. Evidently, there were at least two more men like the dead assassin.

"I' got to locate Mistuh de Aviguez, an' I'm sort of inclined to think he might not come in town today."

He probably wouldn't. After that affair at the mine he'd have to wait and see what happened. When Wallace got over his frenzy and realized he still didn't know what had happened to Buck, he'd start to raise hell. And there was still the matter of the mine. De Aviguez would stay out of sight until he'd taken measures.

"Uh—do you happen to know," asked Chet, "if he's got him a little ranch or somethin' somewheah he could—uh—rest up in for a day or two?"

"Why—yes," she said hesitantly. "I've—heard he has. I don't know where it is, though. You see . . . Mr. de Aviguez sometimes gives—parties that aren't—nice. Somewhere in a house he owns that's quite retired. I think he wanted to—invite me to one of them. And Buck was furious."

The town of Alminas was awake now. Chet saw a girl open up the office opposite. He stood up.

"I don't think de Aviguez is comin' in town today," he observed, "but I'm goin' to ask his secretary. I see she just opened up his office. Thank you, ma'm, for tellin' me what you did."

Chet went out in a savage mood. Buck missing. Probably killed. And this girl lost in the mood of romance at last turned real. And Buck probably dumped somewhere with bullet-holes in his back.

Chet was decidedly savage when he went in de Aviguez's office. The secretary greeted him gracefully.

"Is Mistuh de Aviguez goin' to be in heah this mornin'?" he asked harshly. "If he is, I'm goin' to wait."

"I had a telephone-call from him before I left home," the secretary said sweetly, "saying that he will not be in today. He may call up later. Shall I give him a message?"

CHET tried to be diplomatic.

"I've got to see him in person. Isn't theah any chance of me ridin' up to his house?"

"He is not in Alminas. He called from out-of-town. But I'll gladly give him any word you wish to send."

Cagey. She wouldn't tell him how to reach de Aviguez's hidden house, even if she knew it. She probably didn't. De Aviguez was wise.

"You tell him," said Chet harshly, "that Chet Holliday came in to see him. Tell him I'm still lookin' for him. But add that nobody but Buck Enderby knew the facts that were so—uh—alarmin' to him. So he don't have to worry about shuttin' anybody else up."

De Aviguez would get the point, of course. Chet was trying to keep him from thinking he had to silence anybody else besides Chet. If he was believed it would be some protection for the Hanks family, of course, but at the moment Chet was thinking of the girl in the Alminas Café. Bad enough if she'd lost Buck. She shouldn't suffer more through de Aviguez's fear that Buck might have told her too much.

Chet went out. He headed savagely for the livery-stable. He had to find de Aviguez somehow! But his eyes fell upon the Sheriff, moving comfortably away from the jail. The Sheriff saw him almost at the same instant, and of the two the Sheriff was much more discomposed. Chet headed straight for him, walking purposefully. The Sheriff fidgeted.

"I heah you were lookin' for me las' night," said Chet grimly.

"Why—er—yes, I was," said the Sheriff uneasily. "Nothing so important, though, Mr. de Aviguez wanted to ask you something. It don't matter now."

"I don't suppose it does," agreed Chet. His eyes were very cold. "Have you got any idea wheah I could find Buck Enderby?"

"Him?" The Sheriff said genially: "He's right in the jail now. There was something of a ruckus last night and he got hit on the head. The jail was the quickest place to take him, so we took him there. Do you want to talk to him, Mr. Holliday? He ought to be awake now."

"I sure do want to talk to him!" said Chet.

"Then come this way," said the Sheriff.

He led the way. Up the brick steps to the jail proper. Past his own office, where a man started up at sight of Chet. Up a flight of stairs within. A cell-door stood part-way open. The Sheriff indicated it and stood aside.

"In here, Mr. Holliday."

Chet swung to go in. He did go in. Then suspicion struck home with the force of a blow. The cell was empty. He whirled, and the door was slammed. His whole weight on it only checked its force. The lock clicked. Then the Sheriff said in a business-like tone that was full of satisfaction:

"You're under arrest, Mr. Holliday. For murder! Pretty clever, to be pretending to hunt for Buck Enderby!"

Then he called down the flight of steps.

"Come on up, boys! We've got to get his pistol away from him! I've got him locked up, but he isn't disarmed."

Strangling with an icy wrath, Chet found that sardonic. The men to whom the Sheriff called were undoubtedly the same ones who had accompanied him last night, while he hunted for Chet. They were of a kind with the ratty little man who'd tried to dry-gulch him a couple of days past. Come up with the intention of disarming him? If he'd been just a little less furious, Chet could have laughed at that. He wasn't going to be disarmed. He was going to be killed, in a gun-fight in the jail as he resisted arrest.

Feet clattered on the stone steps. He heard the click of guns being cocked. That, of course, was merely readiness to cope with a desperate criminal, trapped in a cell and charged with murder.

CHAPTER XI

A STREAK of very early sunshine came in the solitary barred window and went out the door. Then it smote on the farther wall of the jail's second story. Chet saw his shadow outlined in the many-striped beam. He heard footsteps below; the movements of perfectly competent and confident men preparing to finish up the job of which the first part was his trapping. Perhaps the Sheriff only intended his disarming. These deputies, with orders from de Aviguez, would intend otherwise. They'd taken care of Buck.

"Are you going to give up your gun, Mr. Holliday?" asked the Sheriff genially. "If so, put it out through the bars. We'll have to shoot you in the arm and get it anyhow if you don't surrender it."

Chet did not answer. With three unseen men watching his every movement as shown by his shadow, he was coldly investigating the lock in the barred door. It was heavy iron, cased in.

"Are you going to give up your gun?" repeated the Sheriff.

The keyhole was the best place, slanting up and inward.

"I'll give you three seconds," said the Sheriff. "One—"

"BANG!" Chet's gun slid out, jammed smoothly into place, and went off in one swift movement. The powder-gases themselves added to the havoc the heavy lead

slug wrought, tearing the works of the lock and bulging out the heavy sheet-metal of the casing. Then Chet's weight was against the door. It gave, but it did not open.

"BANG!" Another shot. Not at the lock, this time. Bad tactics, to seem too much concerned with the door. The bullet smashed against the opposite wall, rebounded, and whistled crazily down the steps. Somebody down there leaped for better shelter. There is no sound on earth so daunting as the lunatic whine of a ricochet, when a man knows what it is.

"BANG!" That was into the lock again. The three shots went off with the deliberate spacing of efficiency. Chet wasn't wasting time at all. One shot into the lock, another down the steps, a third into the lock. . . .

He stepped out into the hall and his gun covered the Sheriff. The Sheriff had a gun out too, of course, but he could not face Chet Holliday, lips compressed into a thin hard line, a smoking gun in his hand, stepping grimly out of the cell in which he was to have been "shot while resisting disarming by the Sheriff and deputies." The Sheriff went gray and as Chet's gun lined up for his heart he choked and his weapon clattered to the floor.

Chet moved forward purposefully. A voice panted from below.

"Sheriff! What's happened?"

The Sheriff tried to speak, but he could not. Chet's eyes flamed into his. There was a strange, quite incredible silence in the jail. Chet took two steps more and his gun-muzzle pressed into the Sheriff's belly. His face was barely a foot from the other's ashy countenance, and there was such deadly wrath upon his features that the Sheriff's breath stopped.

"Sheriff!" Again a voice from below. It was not the same one. "What happened Did he git out?"

Chet's face flickered. He reached out steely fingers. He swung the Sheriff about. And then in one savage movement he had flung him headlong down the stairs and was plunging down after him with his gun as ready as the head of a darting snake.

Pandemonium arose from the stair-well. A shriek from the Sheriff as he fell. The deafening explosion of a rifle. A bullet smashed against the ceiling and went racketing crazily about the confined space above-stairs. A six-gun roared thunderously. Fallings. Crashings. The sickening thud of metal against flesh and the bone beneath it. A man cried shrilly, choking, *"Don't!"* Then another blow.

Silence. Somebody breathed heavily. Then Chet's voice, thick and purring with rage.

But the Sheriff did not answer him. He couldn't. In that extraordinary tangle of three bodies at the foot of the stairs, with Chet plunging down to add to the confusion, the Sheriff had gotten a crack on the head. He was out, singularly at peace, while of his two deputies one was trying to stop a flow of blood from a bullet-wound in his leg and the other moaned over an arm shattered by a blow from Chet's gun-barrel. The wounded man snarled up at Chet. Both deputies were safely disarmed.

"You' O.K., fella," said Chet, with burning eyes. "Y'friend's not hurt bad either. You two crawl over to that cell theah. I'm goin' to lock you in, an' the Sheriff with you."

HE fumbled about the unconscious Sheriff until he found keys. He unlocked a cell door. Somebody inside the cell said hungrily:

"H'llo, Chet. Sam's in the other cell over theah!"

"Mmh! Dick Hanks! Howdo!" said Chet in ironic politeness. "Your pa needs you bad. He's gettin' outa the Valley. He's got to. Want to break jail?"

"Hell, yeah," said the lanky young man desperately. "That louse of a Sheriff has been graftin' on our grub! We' half-starved!"

"Turn Sam loose, then," said Chet. "I'm goin' to move, an' move fast. Crawl in heah, fella!"

The wounded man obeyed, snarling. The man with the broken arm followed, moaning softly. Chet heaved the Sheriff in and slammed the door. Two lean young men faced him desperately.

"Lookaheah, Chet! We ain't seen you in years, but we'd ha' known you anyways. We' starved! We ain't goin' to stay in heah! The Sheriff, he aims to chase us outa the Valley. All our family! He tol' us we' goin' to be kep' slammed in jail all the time till we' ready to quit!"

"Quit, then," said Chet. "I got to hide out now, I'm guessin', so all I can do is give y'a a coupla guns that're hangin' around an' tell you to hit the breeze."

The taller of the two said bitterly:

"We'll be hittin' it!"

"I' got no horse for you," said Chet, "an' I'm advisin' you to separate from me an' stay separated. I'm in trouble an' I'm makin' more."

He reloaded his gun and made for the door that led outside. As he appeared in the opening, men scattered. The shooting in the jail had been heard, but it seemed to those outside that Chet came out of the doorway almost immediately. And one of the disadvantages of having a law-abiding citizenry is that in discouraging the wearing of six-guns you encourage the habit of caution. Chet's appearance with a drawn gun in his hand produced temporarily the same result it would have produced in any other law-abiding community. Men scattered.

He went down the steps, looked searchingly about, and reholstered his gun. He walked composedly toward the livery-stable. Behind him, the Hanks boys came tumbling out with guns in their hands too. But somebody shouted, safely far away. Sam Hanks snarled. Dick Hanks clutched his arm. The two of them broke into a run.

A humming murmur began as they legged it desperately down the street. A yell arose, which broke off short as Chet turned, his hand on his hip. But the two lanky young men, dead-white and desperate, aroused the instinct of pursuit in the same way that a running cat arouses a dog. Men with their six-guns safely at home swore luridly. One or two popped into stores and frenziedly demanded firearms with which to stop a jail-break. Some bright soul found a shot-gun. He ran out upon the side-walk and let loose a load of birdshot after the fleeing pair. Sam Hanks stopped short and desperately blazed away behind him. Then Chet turned and deliberately fired at the marksman. Chet's bullet went close, only a foot over his head, which was exactly where it was intended to go. The marksman dropped the shot-gun and dived for shelter. There was no concerted action. Men babbled and shouted and ran here and there. Alminas hummed with swiftly communicated excitement.

And the panic-stricken young men saw a green auto stop at a filling-station at the edge of town. It was an Eastern car, and a dyspeptic elderly man with brown driving-glasses was in the act of counting out the exact change to pay for the gas and oil he'd bought. Another shot-gun came into play. Birdshot spattered the two fugitives. Somebody else blazed away with a .32 revolver from a good two-hundred-yard distance, where any revolver is inaccurate and a .32 is plain useless.

Panting, almost hysterical with fear, the two Hanks boys plunged upon that car. The dyspeptic Easterner leaped like a jack-rabbit when the business end of a six-gun stared him in the face, backed by the wide and frightened eyes of Sam Hanks. Dick slid under the wheel. The car roared.

The car went hurtling down the main street. Two frightened young men sat in it. Shot-guns boomed at them. One of the young men fired hysterically back at the puffs of smoke. The car went careering crazily out of town to the sound of gunshots. The two Hanks boys, escaping just four days before the expiration of a sixty-day term for chicken-stealing—a crime they had not committed—fled from Alminas in a stolen car and amid the popping of guns. They were scared three parts to death.

AND Chet, who had shot his way out of a cell in the jail after being officially arrested for murder—Chet walked quietly down a side street to the livery-stable, tossed a quarter to the Mexican stable-boy, and rode out of Alminas on the dun horse with Typhoon trailing him at the end of a lead-rope.

There was no pursuit of him for a long time. The stealing of the car and its melodramatic, panic-stricken flight focused all eyes upon it. In the tumult which followed the small shooting affray, men thought first of telephoning ahead to have the car stopped. It was not until the jail had been explored and the two wounded deputies attended to that the need to pursue Chet occurred to anybody.

Chet put a long distance behind him without hindrance. His first need was to get out of the broad bottom of Fighting Horse Valley. To get to the wooded hillsides and the broken ground where pursuit would not be easy. His second need was to get in touch with Carol. To get word to Wallace of just what had happened. That Buck had been murdered and an attempt had been made to murder Chet because of what Chet had seen down in the

mine. And then the third thing to do was to get to de Aviguez and choke the truth out of him, and then act as that truth seemed to make desirable.

Somehow he didn't take his own danger seriously. That it was real there could be no doubt. He had violated the laws and statutes. He had shot one man and crippled up two others that everybody knew about. He had even killed one man, though no one but Buck knew that. But all unconsciously he counted on the ultimate triumph of truth and law and order to vindicate him.

He was enlightened before he reached the edge of the valley bottom. He'd seen but paid no heed to the spidery lines of telephone-wires which went here and there about the valley. The tall sides of the mountains loomed up before him. He was scanning the nearer foothills, picking a way which would take him first into hiding and then on the route to the JW, when he received the first intimation that not all his troubles were left behind.

Something made a spout of dust ten yards before the dun horse's fore-hoofs. Instantly thereafter came the *"spat"* of the rifle which had fired the shot. A second shot to one side. Chet's gun came tumbling into his hand. But one glance told him it was hopeless. A good four hundred yards to cover. A man with a rifle shooting at him in the open.

He whirled the dun at right angles to his former course. He dug in his spurs. He raced ahead, watching the place from which the bullets had come. He saw a thrashing in the bushes. For one instant he caught a glimpse of a horse plunging along to intercept him.

"Huh!" said Chet grimly. "Word got ahead. This fella's by himself, an' he ain't blood-thirsty. He figures on headin' me back so some more fellas can come along an' catch me. Sensible!"

It was. A man with a rifle against a man with a six-gun is on top, when the man with the six-gun is in the open. He can kill that man. But he has either to kill him or let him go. It takes more than one man to capture an armed fugitive without killing him.

With the first intimation of Chet's evil doings newly come over telephone-wires, a single man wouldn't feel inclined to shoot him down on sight. There was not yet a reward for him. The man racing along in the brush was trying to head him off from cover, but he hadn't the sense of justification for homicide that even the most poorly-printed of reward-notices would have given him.

That hesitation had given Chet warning, and now it gave him his chance. Tearing along, bent low in the saddle with Typhoon snorting at the end of his lead-rope, he edged imperceptibly toward the edge of the brush that came down the nearer hillsides. A long conical slope, rock-strewn and sparsely covered with young trees, reached out into the level ground across which Chet raced. He shot past the end of that slope just as the rider in cover realized his approaching safety and unlimbered the rifle again to send a burst of shots spattering at him.

They missed. Chet went streaking past the point of safety. Rocky ground rose between him and his solitary pursuer. Then he swung sharply again, plunged straight for the hillside, and was reined in waiting grimly when the other man came hurtling over the top of the rise, straining his eyes for a sight of Chet beyond.

CHET shot the onrushing horse dead. He winced even as he pulled the trigger, but it was a choice of shooting the horse or the man. His bullet smashed home and the horse leaped convulsively, half-turned in mid-air, and came down with a crash.

When its rider crawled from where he'd been thrown, shaken up and swearing, a snapped word from Chet made him jerk his head up to look into the muzzle of a gun.

"Stick 'em up," said Chet harshly. "Um. Y'lost your six-gun. All right. You can't get at that rifle. Set still a minute. You' from the JW? Your horse is branded that way."

Gaping at him, his erstwhile pursuer nodded.

"What kinda news sent you after me?" demanded Chet.

"Telephone," said the JW rider. "I was line-ridin'. Met a fella from the nex' ranch. He said the Hanks boys busted jail an' lit out in a stolen car, shootin' up the town as they went. An' you was partners with 'em, an' went out o' town on horseback trailing a big yellow horse behind you."

Chet grunted savagely.

"An' what'm I wanted for?"

"Murder, the fella said."

Chet grunted again.

"Look heah! You go back to the JW ranchhouse an' hunt up Wallace an' Miss Carol Bradley. Get me?"

"Y-yeah."

"Tell 'em," said Chet grimly, "that I found out Buck Enderby's dead. Tell Wallace he c'n figure out who's responsible from what happened last night. Understan' that?"

"Y-yeah."

"Then you tell Miss Carol I'm huntin' the fella I know got Buck killed. I'm goin' to get him! An' tell her I'm goin' to try an' get in touch with her later."

"Y-yeah. I got you." Chet's former pursuer said suddenly. "Say, fella! You don't sound so lethal. Y'say Buck's dead? He was a good fella. Who bumped him?"

"That's what I aim to find out," snarled Chet. "Dammit, he was the only straight man in Fightin' Horse Valley, an' the coyote that killed him—"

The JW man said painfully:

"But why? Why'd somebody bump him? I—I liked Buck!"

"They bumped him," said Chet bitterly, "because he was a friend of mine! Get goin'!"

He turned his back upon the man who had been flinging lead at him a little while since, and pressed forward to the cover of the hills.

Branches whipped at him as he forced his way through them. Behind him, now, Fighting Horse Valley hummed and buzzed with excitement. A jail-break, a wild dash through town in a stolen car that spat bullets. . . . The tale spread swiftly and grew more swiftly still. Chet became an ominous figure, a sinister and menacing scoundrel who had come into Alminas to rescue members of his gang. The Hanks boys became youthful, conscienceless desperados.

By the time Chet had gotten to what he considered a strategic spot, all of Fighting Horse Valley had heard the tale in one or another of its stages of exaggeration. The mildest of them was bad enough. The worst made sober citizens dig out long-neglected firearms and make them ready for instant use.

But Chet could not know that. He was in safety. It was more than an hour since he'd sent a message to the JW. He looked down at the Hanks' shack. A crawling cloud of dust was sweeping toward it, very near. A motor-car. He gazed across the Valley. Other dust-clouds here and there.

"De Aviguez's got nerve," he said coldly to himself, "knowin' that Wallace is onto him, to pull this stuff. . . . I wonder if he got a gang an' went back to the mine."

The thought had its aspect of sardonic humor. De Aviguez and Wallace, each desperately intent on keeping Chet from going into that long-deserted drift. He'd been in. Then that eternal, irritating "Why?" leaped to the fore as it always did at every thought of the antics of these two, and — well — this time something clicked in Chet's brain. He wondered irritably who those long-dead individuals in the mine had been.

And he froze, all alone upon the high walls of Fighting Horse Valley. The dun horse checked, and Chet did not realize it. He sat still, staring at nothing, frozen to motionlessness by the sheer impact of a thought which was merely the rephrasing of a question. He changed a question from "Why?" to "Who?" And he forgot the fact that he was hunted in a sudden, enraging enlightenment. He forgot, for a moment, the death of Buck. He even did not think of Carol. As suddenly and as completely as if he'd just remembered it, he knew why both Wallace and de Aviguez fought bitterly over that long-deserted mine. When he ceased to ask "Why?" and asked "Who?" instead, he understood. And a hot rage swept over him. Bloodlust filled him. He ground his teeth.

Then he suddenly spurred the dun horse about. With Typhoon still trailing him, Chet started savagely for the Hanks' shack. He came out into the open for a space and saw a motor-car stopped before the front door. Figures scurried about. But Chet paid no attention. He rode on ruthlessly, white with fury over something he knew had happened at least twenty years before.

CHAPTER XII

NO part of Chet's stay in Fighting Horse Valley had been what anybody would call placid. He'd ridden into Alminas just a little over ten days ago. Into those ten days he'd packed battles with Typhoon, exploration of his mine, at least one gun-fight when he'd killed his antagonist, and he'd come to a highly agreeable understanding with Carol Brad-

ley. But the past twenty-four hours had contained as much action as nearly all the rest of the time put together. It seemed as if the finding of two skeletons, of human beings dead these many years, had been like a spark touched to powder.

Now Chet thought he understood why. He forced the dun horse up a steep ravine-wall. Typhoon trailed willingly enough. He reached the long, steep hillside before the shack. Chet was half-way up it when he heard a motor roar. That noise moved away. In the stillness of the mountains he even heard bumpings and crashings as the car negotiated the almost impassable trail down from the squatter's shack. He didn't know who was in the car. He didn't care. He was raging, more furious over the discovery he was sure he'd made than over any other thing that had happened since his coming. And his discovery was of a tragedy a generation old!

He came into the open. The Hanks' shack was a bare quarter-mile away. A cloud of dust still swirled along the bumpy, twisting trail from it. Through that dust he caught momentary glimpses of a green car leaping, bouncing, jolting, streaking for the lower ground and the hard roads that would permit of speed. It was the Hanks boys, foolishly come to their father's house before making their getaway.

Chet reached the house. 'Bijah Hanks looked up and saw him and paled. He wrung his hands. Then he quivered visibly. Chet drew rein.

"The boys get heah?" he asked curtly.

"Y-yeah, Chet," said Hanks agitatedly. "They' gone now. They said you turned 'em loose an' they stole a car an' come for the rest of us. We didn't go. Git down an' set, Chet. Y'safe heah."

Chet dismounted.

"I'll set on the porch," he said. "I need to keep an eye on my horses. I want to talk to you, suh. I need information."

'Bijah's hands shook. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"W-wait a minute, Chet," he said nervously. "I'll git us a drink. We c'n talk better."

He hastened into the house. Chet saw him lick his lips. A bottle and a glass clinked. Lisbeth came sullenly around the corner of the house. She wasn't so neat, today. Her dress trailed.

"You' in plenty of trouble now," she said harshly. "I guess you wish you'd lef' that Carol Bradley alone now, don't you?" She looked at Chet and her eyes burned with a queer mixture of childish hate and woman's fury. "I'll be even with you yet!"

Chet said somberly:

"An' if I'd acted like you wanted me to, you'd have a sure-'nough reason to hate me. I'd ha' made a fool outa you."

"Wait an' see!" she cried. "I'm goin' to make a fool outa you!"

'Bijah Hanks came out of the house. He was white and fidgety. His hands were empty. He started to sit down and grinned agitatedly.

"Theah, now! I forgot the drink! I took one m'self, an' forgot one for you, Chet! Wait a minute! I'll git it! Ain't nothin' too good for you, Chet! Set still! I'll bring it!"

He vanished again. Lisbeth's lip curled. 'Bijah reappeared. He put the bottle down beside Chet.

"Theah, now! Right glad you come back, Chet. The boys, they' right much obliged to you. They lit out o' Alminas like bats out o' hell in that car. They come for the rest of the family, to take us all out o' heah wheah we ain't wanted."

"You'd've done well to go," said Chet shortly. He wanted to ask questions, and the very thought of the answers he expected caused stirrings of rage within him. But he didn't want to ask those questions while Lisbeth stood by.

"No," said 'Bijah Hanks mournfully. "I' lived most o' my life in Fightin' Horse Valley, an' when it's time for me to die I want to die right in this heah spot."

"THE boys shoulda left that car somewheah an' got out of the Valley on foot," said Chet. "That car's marked. It's a cinch it's been phoned ahead about."

"Yeah. I told 'em. They were aimin' to make for the highway an' push her up to full speed, but I told 'em that's what everybody'd expec' 'em to do. So they' headin' up the Valley. Take yourself a drink, Chet! Set an' rest! Lots o' time!"

Chet regarded him sharply for an instant. But he was too full of what he wanted to know to be suspicious.

"Lisbeth," he said quietly, "clear out o' heah, will you? I got somethin' I want to ask your pa about. Not about you."

Lisbeth sullenly moved out of sight.

"I want to know somethin' about my pa," said Chet abruptly.

"Why—I tol' you, Chet. He come in heah to engineer that mine you bought. It was on JW lan', an' he met Miz' Wallace, that was Mistuh Wallace's wife. An' they run off."

"Yeah. That's what I want to know about. Wheah'd he stay? He boarded me with you. Wheah'd he board?"

"He boarded with us too, Chet. We hadda good house then. They chased us out when—um—when y'were about five years old. Y'pa boarded with us till he run off. We lived good on his board money."

Chet leaned forward.

"The time he ran off," he said quietly. "When'd you see him last? Night or day?"

"My gosh, Chet! It's been twenty years a'gone!" Hanks squirmed. "He—uh—why, he come in from town, I think. Yeah. An' presently somebody brought him a note. I don't know who 'twas from. Then he went out. We heard him ridin' off. He never come back."

"Twenty years gone," repeated Chet. "But you remembered all about it nex' mornin'? Especial when it turned out he'd run off with Wallace's wife?"

Hanks looked at him blankly.

"What y'want to know all this stuff for, Chet?"

"Go on! You remember it all! Did he look excited or somethin'?"

Hanks' eyes flickered around the landscape.

"I don't reg'n he did, Chet. We didn't pay no 'tention. They'd figured out the mine wouldn't pay, then, an' paid off everybody. He was leavin' in a few more days anyways."

"That fits in," said Chet grimly. "Yeah! He left. He didn't return. What then?"

"Why—uh—nex' mornin' Mistuh de Aviguez come up an' asked about him."

"De Aviguez? How'd he get in the ruckus?" demanded Chet.

"Why, he was Mistuh Wallace's lawyer. He done all his paper-drawin' for him. They was good frien's!"

"He came up an' asked about my father. What'd you tell him?"

"Jus' what happened. He'd gone out an' not come back. An' Mistuh de Aviguez looked solemn an' said he was kinda worried. So he went into your pa's room."

"What for?"

"He gave me a coupla dollars," explained 'Bijah Hanks.

Chet said curtly:

"Go on!"

"An' he come out an' said he didn't understan' it, an' went off."

"Didn't understand what?"

"I didn't know, then. O'course, it was your pa runnin' off with Miz' Wallace. He'd visited up to the JW ranchhouse, an' I kinda heard folks say that somebody'd seen 'em talkin' together somewheah. But they'd run off. Right after y'pa got that note. He went out, an' met her, an' they run off."

Now Chet's eyes glowed.

"How do you know they ran off?" he demanded.

"Why—uh—they run off, Chet! They was both gone, come mornin'. Theah horses was gone. Mistuh Wallace, he knew. He never said a word about Miz' Wallace. He never hunted for her. He shut his mouth an' got kinda bitter-lookin', but he never said a word. Somebody else said later on that Mistuh de Aviguez found out they'd rid up to a railroad station somewheah an' bought tickets an' got on the train an' went off. Theah horses come back a long while after without saddles or bridles."

CHET said evenly:

"All right. Now, when did my mine cave in?"

"When? A right long time ago, Chet. Years an' years."

"About that time?"

"I don't know. . . . Yeah, I guess I do." 'Bijah Hanks mopped his forehead. He cast a somehow appealing glance about the landscape. "It was right around the same time, Chet."

"The mine caved in, then, the same night my father an' Wallace's wife ran off?"

"I don't know, Chet! It mighta been. Somewheah around then. It couldn't ha' been before your pa left, o'course. It musta been right after."

Chet snarled suddenly:

"It was the same night! An' that mine didn't cave in! It was blown up!"

Hanks mopped his forehead again. He fidgeted all over.

"I—uh—I reg'n I'll go inside an' get a drink, Chet."

"It's right heah," said Chet curtly. "Take it!" He thrust over the bottle. "How about what I said? The mine was blown up!"

"Why—uh—Chet, nobody paid much 'tention to the mine. Everybody was right much wrought up about your pa an' Miz' Wallace runnin' off. An' the mine was closed up anyways. Seems like I heard theah'd been some blastin' powder or dynamite or somethin' left in the drift when they stopped workin', and it'd gone off, but nobody paid much attention . . ."

Hanks shook visibly. He seemed to be talking almost at random. Lisbeth came around the corner of the house again. She stared sullenly at both of them.

"He's back." The words were addressed exclusively to her father.

Hanks sank back in his chair and wiped off his forehead. He looked relieved. Infinitely relieved. But then he looked furtively at Chet and his terror seemed to return.

"Who's back?" asked Chet sharply. He half-rose in his seat.

"N-nobody!" panted 'Bijah Hanks desperately. He made a pushing motion with hand. "Set down, Chet! Lots o' time! No hurry! Set still! You make me feel like ol' times, talkin'—"

Chet stood up. 'Bijah wrung his hands.

"What's this heah?" demanded Chet harshly. "You' been actin' dam' funny all the time I' been heah! Who's come back?"

"Tommy," said Lisbeth.

"Shet yo' mouth!" cried her father. "Nobody ain't come back! Nobody ain't been away! Set down, Chet! Don't pay no 'tention to Lisbeth!"

"What's all this?" demanded Chet again. "Lisbeth, what's your pa actin' so queer about?"

"Nothin'," insisted Hanks frantically. "Set still, Chet! Lisbeth, you go 'round to the kitchen an' fix Chet up a snack!"

He tried to beam at Chet. But the effect was spoiled by his eyes. They were frightened. They were wide and staring. And his hands, too, twitched uncontrollably. Chet fingered his gun-butt.

"Somethin' very funny goin' on," he said quietly. "Mighty funny! Tommy's come back, huh? Wheah'd he go?"

Lisbeth laughed again.

"He went down to the store, Chet," she said mirthlessly. " 'Bout an hour after you left heah las' night, all mad about the Sheriff an' Typhoon. Mistuh de Aviguez come in."

"Shet y'mouth—" Hanks fairly screamed it. Then he looked at Chet and was struck dumb. He stood as if paralyzed. Only his hands twitched.

"Yeah," said Chet coldly. "Shut up, suh. Go on, Lisbeth. De Aviguez came heah. That was after I'd left heah for good. I reg'n he came heah from the mine. I saw him up theah in the middle of the night. We—uh—we didn't get along so good."

Lisbeth sat down on the porch.

"He tol' us that. He kinda hinted around that you were goin' to be 'rested. He said the Sheriff'd been heah an' missed you, an' you'd found out about it an' gone off again with Typhoon."

"Yeah," said Chet. His hand lingered as if by instinct beside his holster. "Keep on talkin', Lisbeth."

"Mistuh de Aviguez said you was a right dangerous character, an' pa agreed with him. He tol' pa he'd pay him five hundred dollars if somehow pa'd arrange that you'd get caught by the Sheriff. An' pa said he would."

"Chet!" 'Bijah Hanks wept weak tears. "I didn't do no such thing! You know I wouldn't do that, Chet!"

Chet looked at him detachedly.

"I kinda think you would, suh," he observed. " 'Right much obliged, Lisbeth. So when y'pa went in to get himself an' me a drink, he sent Tommy down to the store to get the Sheriff telephoned to!"

'Bijah Hanks wrung his hands.

"I didn't, Chet! I didn't! She's lyin'!" he gasped. "She's lyin'! Y'wouldn't kill me, would you, Chet? 'Fore Gawd, Mistuh de Aviguez promised—"

Chet moved to the side of the house. He surveyed the valley toward Alminas. There were little streaks of dust perhaps a quarter of the way down the Valley. They were coming fast; too fast to be horses. Chet counted them in an icy calm.

"Three—four—five automobiles, all headin' this way an' burnin' up the breeze! Mmh! Looks like Tommy's message got through!"

'BIJAH sank into a moaning, babbling heap as Chet's entirely icy eyes regarded him speculatively. Chet's hand moved slowly upon the butt of his gun. He seemed to be smoothing down the handgrips with his palm. He owed 'Bijah Hanks a debt of gratitude. He'd planned to pay it.

"Yeah," he said composedly. "I got time to get away, though. Thanks, Lisbeth. I reg'n you did me right much of a favor."

Then Lisbeth came close to him. Her lips twisted a little.

"Yeah. I done that for you, Chet. But pa's goin' to beat me to death if you leave me heah. You can't leave me heah now! You got to take me with you!"

" 'Can't do it, Lisbeth," said Chet. "You know it." He turned to 'Bijah Hanks. "Listen heah, suh!" he said calmly and very deliberately. "Lisbeth's done me a favor. She's saved me from your sneakin' tricks. An' if I ever heah that you beat her, or even that y'told one livin' soul that she's responsible for me gettin' away, I'll come back an' roast you over a slow fire till you beg me t' kill you! Heah that?"

It was just such a lurid and blood-curdling threat as 'Bijah Hanks would believe in. He babbled:

"Y-yessuh! Y-yessuh! I w-won't tech her! I swear it 'fo' Gawd—"

"See y' remember it," said Chet. He turned away. "Thanks, Lisbeth."

But she clung to him.

"Chet!" she insisted hungrily. "You cain't leave me! I'm comin' with you! I got to come with you! I don't care about anything but just lovin' you—"

Chet wrenched himself free. He mounted, his lips tense.

"For Gawd's sake!" he said bitterly. "We' been all over that! I'm plenty grateful! I'll do anything I can to please you. But theah' some thing I'm not goin' to do, an' lettin' you make damfools of y'self an' me is one of 'em! I'm goin'!"

He reined the dun horse about and Typhoon made ready to follow

"I'll git even!" she panted. "Wait! *I'll git even!* I' fixed you a'ready, Chet Holliday! I—done—it—a'ready! *I done it!* I was willin' to love you. I was willin' to do anything y'wanted. Anything! But y'wouldn't have me! Y'wanted that dam' Carol Bradley. But Mistuh de Aviguez was heah las' night! He talked to pa. But when he lef', I slipped out an' talked to him, too!"

Far, far away there was a faint humming sound. It was the noise of motors. Typhoon pricked up his ears.

"I done it!" cried Lisbeth in an ecstasy of passion. "I tol' him if he wan'ed to get even with you to do somethin' to Carol Bradley! I tol' him I'd go over to the JW an' tell her you wan'ed to see her. I tol' him I could git her anywheah he wan'ed! An' I done it!"

"You—" said Chet. His voice was not quite human.

"She was meetin' you!" Lisbeth spat it at him. "Yeah! She thought she was meetin' you! This mornin' at ten o'clock! She went theah! Go find her now! Mistuh de Aviguez 'tended to her! He paid me twenty dollars to get her theah, but I'd ha' done it for nothin'! Go get y' Carol Bradley an' see if y'still want her!"

Quite without volition, Chet's hands reached out. They closed about Lisbeth's throat. Chet neither looked human nor felt human, nor for a moment did he even act like a human being.

But he did not kill Lisbeth. Often, afterward, he wondered why. His hands closed about her throat. The will to kill was assuredly there. But somehow, slowly, the fingers relaxed.

And Chet turned the dun horse and spurred desperately for the route that would lead to the JW ranchhouse with Typhoon racing after him. The roaring of motors grew thunderously loud. The sound of crashing springs, of metallic bumpings, came through the still mountain air. The motor-cars were very close. But Chet did not even hear them. He was racing like a madman for the house where Carol ought to be, though bullets would be waiting for him there. Chet had forgotten all matters other than Carol's safety.

CHAPTER XIII

FIGHTING HORSE VALLEY was in a turmoil. Beginning to stir excitedly with a truly melodramatic jail-break in the early morning, by two-thirty it hummed like a bee-hive. To the north, a green car bounced desperately over quite impassable trails, trying to make a getaway for the two youths in it. To the south, Alminas hummed and buzzed and ran about in circles, because of the jail-break and other news which came in as the morning and early afternoon wore on. To the east, as word reached the hills east of Fighting Horse Valley, men grew grim and, arming themselves, swarmed down out of the high places in quest of action. And to the west, of course, there was the greatest activity of all.

About the Hanks house, for example.

Five packed motor-cars came roaring into view, their radiators steaming furiously because of the terrific pull up to the shack. Men poured out, asking consciously crisp and raging questions of the hopelessly agitated squatter and his family. A saturnine deputy sheriff with his arm in a sling was in charge of the expedition.

Hanks twitched and whined abjectly. The scare Chet had thrown into him still lingered. And these men, armed and raging, were not calculated to reassure anybody of Hanks' stamp about anything.

"Wheah's Chet Holliday?" demanded the bandaged deputy grimly.

"He's gone, suh," said 'Bijah Hanks miserably. "I tried to hold him him heah, but he saw the dust your cars were makin' an'—uh—he lit out."

In this extremity he looked terrifiedly at Lisbeth. She was weeping.

"Which way'd he go?" demanded the deputy sheriff.

'Bijah rolled his eyes. He was pure quivering anguish, undiluted by any trace of courage or resolution.

"Which way'd he go?" snapped the deputy again. "Dammit to hell! You' makin' us lose time!"

'Bijah Hanks swallowed convulsively. He pointed feebly.

"Y'crazy!" said Lisbeth fiercely. "He went that way! Ridin' hard!"

She pointed to another point of the compass entirely. And there was no doubt, no lack of certainty in her indication of the proper direction a pursuit should take.

"Sure about that?" insisted the deputy.

"Y'yeah," said 'Bijah hoarsely. "She's right. He—went thataway."

Pandemonium broke loose. Somebody sent a steaming car valorously along the path Lisbeth had pointed out. It went maybe a quarter of a mile before a front wheel fell into a crack between two rocks. Getting it out would call for a jack and half an hour's work. Another car managed to get two hundred yards farther before it, too, stuck. Pursuit by motor-car was impractical. The deputy sheriff retained his leadership by swearing more virulently than anybody else. He sent the other cars back. One was to swing about to the right and head Chet off if he tried to get away across open country. The other two were to scrape up horses somewhere, anywhere, and come back to take up the chase. The men from the stalled cars would go forward on foot, trying to pick up Chet's trail and gain some time against the return of the mounted men.

Cars bumped and bounded and rattled down the hillside away from the squatter's shack. Two cars remained, deserted. A shouting, scrambling line of men spread out fanwise to hunt for Chet's trail. They hoped the mounted men would bring extra horses, when they came.

Their shouting moved away. It became a faint and dwindling ululation. Relative silence settled about the shack. Lisbeth sat still, clenching and unclenching her hands. Tear-streaks on her face only made her pallor the more evident. Tommy Hanks crawled out from under the house.

"Lisbeth," he said in a whisper, "why'd you lie to 'em?"

Lisbeth said nothing. She stared blindly at vacancy.

"Why'd you lie to 'em?" insisted Tommy. "Pa told 'em wheah Chet went, but you made 'em hunt the wrong way. Why? D'you still like Chet more'n all the stuff pa was goin' to buy with that money?"

HE was a small boy, tow-headed and freckled and very curious. Also, he was very practical. When Lisbeth did not reply he turned to his father.

"Huh!" he observed. "She's crazy!"

Meanwhile Chet spurred the dun horse mercilessly toward the JW. Lisbeth, wanting desperately to hurt him, had said she'd lured Carol to a certain spot at ten o'clock that morning, pretending to be delivering a message from Chet. And through sheer accident that message was horribly apt. Chet and the two Hanks boys had left Alminas separately at only a little past seven in the morning. Not much after eight, Chet had sent word to Carol by a JW rider that he'd get in touch with her as soon as he could. That man, on foot, couldn't have reached the JW ranchhouse many minutes before Lisbeth turned up with a faked but convincing message which would seem to Carol the carrying-out of the just-received promise. She knew nothing of Lisbeth's half-childish but desperate jealousy. She'd have gone at once, to meet Chet. And now it was at least noon.

Spurring mercilessly through the mountain timber, sick with terror for her, Chet could not think of Lisbeth or Hanks or any other thing, except that Carol was at

the mercy of de Aviguez. Even the avenging of Buck's murder took a second place in his mind.

Lisbeth had bragged that he could go and look for Carol now. . . .

Sweat stood out on Chet's face, though he felt icy cold. He drove the dun horse, Typhoon racing after, and tried to drive his brain to such things as he would need to know and do. He cursed himself for not finding out just where Carol had thought she was to meet him. He must organize the JW riders into a wide-flung hunt. Maybe somebody would know in which direction she'd gone. A savage enough, a desperate enough search would frighten de Aviguez. . . . And at the thought of Carol in his hands Chet moaned and dug in his spurs again.

It was ordinarily an hour's ride from the Hanks' to the JW ranchhouse, but Chet made it in little more than thirty minutes.

The dun horse was in better shape for a grueling run than if he'd been freshly mounted. The easy, jogging movements of the past few hours certainly hadn't tired him. He was nicely warmed up to travel.

He was breathing fast, but no more, when Chet sighted the JW ranchbuildings. He loosened his gun in his holster and rode on more savagely still. He wished bitterly for Buck to help him, now. There were orders to shoot him on sight, here, besides the alarm for his morning's activities. He might have to shoot his way to Wallace to tell his story. He might have to battle before he could get anyone to listen to the danger Carol was in.

Then he saw that the *remuda* corral was suspiciously depleted. There were no moving figures about the place. The ranchhouse and all the buildings about it had a dead, untenanted look. Chet let off a burst of shots as he drew near. He was white with a new, incredulous terror. Somehow he couldn't hope that Carol's abduction, if it had taken place, was already known. The most probable thing was that every JW hand had taken to horse to hunt him down for his jail-break of the morning, and that no man could now be found to help him search for Carol.

He fired the six-gun empty as he raced ahead, straining his eyes for a sight of a moving figure. He reloaded, sick with apprehension, and started to fire again. But when he was six hundred yards from the ranchhouse a single man limped into view. Chet bore down upon him like a madman.

"Wheah's Wallace?" he demanded fiercely. "Wheah's all the han's? Wheah—"

Then he saw the look upon the face of the Mexican house-servant. He was old and white-haired and wrinkled. But he stared up at Chet and his fine brown eyes flashed fire.

"You come to keel me?" he said with dignity. "Keel, then! but for the *Señorita* Carol you yourself shall die ten thousan' deaths!"

"My Gawd!" cried Chet desperately. "Wheah is she? What's happened? She ain't—"

"*Por Dios!* You should know!" cried the old man fiercely. "You are Chet Holliday—"

"Tell me, man!" panted Chet. "Wheah is Carol? What's happened? Wheah can I fin' Wallace an' the han's?"

"For the *Señorita,* you know better than anyone else," said the servant as fiercely as before. "You stole her! You sent a letter demanding much money—"

CHET flung himself from his horse. His gun tumbled out into his hand. Then he thrust it away. It was useless.

"What happened?" he panted in a frenzy. "I ain't seen her! I'm lookin' for her! I'm scared somethin's happened to her! Just heard—"

"Bah! You deed not send for her to meet you?" The Mexican's lip quivered, but in his tone was utterly scornful disbelief. "You deed not send back her horse with a letter fastened to eets saddle, demanding much money, signed weeth your name?"

"That's de Aviguez!" A red mist seemed to form before Chet's eyes. "He's got her, an' puttin' it off on me . . . Gawd! He's killed her before now! Like he had Buck killed! Figurin' I'll get shot by the first man that sees me, an' meanwhile Wallace won't be thinkin' of goin' in the mine. . . . He'll have all this doin's covered up. . . ."

There was no hope. There could be no hope. Carol lured away to meet Chet. Her horse returned with a ransom note apparently signed by Chet. The whole of Fighting Horse Valley a seething mass of raging men longing only to lay hands upon him in order to tear him to bits. . . .

Decidedly, de Aviguez need have no fear of anyone going in the mine to examine the bodies there until this affair was over.

Chet seized the old man savagely by the shoulder.

"Look heah! I got to find Wallace! I got to find him in a hurry! Wheah is he?"

"He looks for you!" said the old man defiantly. "An' when he finds you, he weel stake you on an ant-hill—"

"Wheah is he?"

"He searches, an' soon he weel find—"

Chet groaned and thrust the man aside. He moved blindly. He must find somebody, get word to somebody so the search would take a rational course—a hunt for de Aviguez. The telephone! He plunged toward the house, which was silent and so horribly empty. He stumbled through its echoing rooms until he found the instrument. He lifted the receiver. No sound. He swore frenziedly, and then remembered. He hunted for the ringer-box. He turned the absurd small crank which alone would attract the distant operator's attention. A tiny voice in his ear.

"Hello?"

"I' got to find somebody in charge of this man-hunt," said Chet hoarsely. "Can y'locate Wallace?"

"No." The voice was eager. "Has Miss Bradley been found?"

"Hell, no! Can y'locate Wallace?"

"Nobody knows just where he is. The Sheriff is in charge of the whole hunt. Everybody in the Valley is out and searching. Shall I give you the Sheriff?"

"Yeah."

Then Chet was on the verge of smashing the receiver home. The Sheriff? De Aviguez's man? To help find Carol? He might not know what de Aviguez had done, but assuredly Chet's true tale poured into his ears would not result in a hunt for de Aviguez. It would concentrate a search for Chet, here! And Carol was dead, killed by that fiend.

The buzz of a ringer-phone answered at the other end. The Sheriff's voice:

"Hello, Sheriff of Alminas speaking."

Chet suddenly became deadly cool. To tell the truth to the Sheriff would be worse than useless. Everything was useless, now. Everything but revenge. But the Sheriff would know where de Aviguez hid out. He'd be able to find him. And Chet could make him. . . .

"H'llo," said Chet. His voice was hoarse with passion, but pitched low and cautiously. "This the Sheriff?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"I'm—uh—a friend of yours," said Chet. His brain was working with inhuman precision, piecing together a hint from Buck, a word gathered here and there, a suspicion, the wildest of guesses. "I'm from—uh—across the Border. An' I run into a hell of a mess. What's this man-hunt goin' on? Dammit, a coupla fellas shot at me!"

"Eh? Who are you?"

"I'm a fella from across the Border," Chet repeated. "I'm carryin'—somethin'."

That was based on Buck's hint of a smuggling route from the Border which passed through the Valley. It would be dope, most probably. Chet used the intonation which would suit somebody of the stamp of the one man he'd had to kill, and the two deputies he'd fought in the jail that morning. He was trying to suggest the cautious appeal of a man who might be carrying smuggled stuff and who on entering Fighting Horse Valley had run into the most highly-organized man-hunts and was frightened thereby.

The Sheriff, at the other end of the wire, squawked suddenly.

"B-be careful what you say!" he said uneasily. "What's the matter?"

"My first trip," said Chet, still in a low and cautious tone. "I' been dodgin' people that act too dam' inquisitive. But all hell's loose. You better send somebody to meet me. I got to get to de Aviguez. Got a special message for him, too. It's important!"

THE Sheriff said bitterly:

"Everything has to happen at once! Where are you?"

"Hell! I don't know! I got chased off the route they told me to follow. A little while back I saw a town I guess is Alminas. I'm about four miles outa it, on a pass—" Chet described a place he had passed only that morning, along which a telephone-line ran. He could guess, of course, at an instrument not far away. "I'm in a house now, o'course. I sneaked up. Nobody around. I ducked in an' called you. You better send somebody to meet me an' pass me through this dam' posse you' got huntin' everywhere!"

The Sheriff swore luridly. Then he said:

"Listen here! You come along that pass

till you can look out over the Valley. I'll come myself to meet you. I'll have to. Nobody else around here who knows the place you've got to go. Watch out for me. You'll see my badge. I'll come, though how in hell I'm going to keep this hunt going. . . . Everything has to happen at once. . . ."

A click. The operator's voice cut in, eagerly.

"Sheriff? A report's come through from up the Valley that Holliday was seen up there with a girl roped on a horse, about half an hour ago!"

"All right," snapped the Sheriff. "That's four times in four places, miles apart! I'll attend to it. You, fella! Wait for me! I'll be right along!"

He hung up. Chet put his receiver back on the hook with fingers that shook. He saw a clock. After two. And Carol had thought she was to meet him at ten! He could have no hope. He dared not think of what might, of what must have happened to her before now. To think of it invited madness. But de Aviguez would never dare let her live. He'd kidnaped her. He'd sent her horse back with a ransom demand pinned to its saddle. He did not want the ransom. He wanted Wallace to forget for a time the mine Chet had bought, and he wanted Chet killed. Instantly. This was the best possible way to achieve both objects.

Chet opened the door and went out. And instantly a rifle cracked and a bullet crashed through wood behind his head. It had missed him by inches. Without volition his six-gun snapped into his hand and roared. The Mexican servant staggered. The rifle dropped from his hand.

"Hell!" said Chet detachedly. "He's a good man, at that. Tryin' to kill me on account o' Carol. . . ."

He went to the old man. The shock of the heavy bullet striking had been terrific.

"Carol's dead," he said almost gently. "You liked her. I'm going to tie up that arm before I go kill the fella that hurt her."

He did bandage the arm, by force. He remembered then that the telephone was still workable. He went back in the house and smashed the instrument beyond any possibility of repair, because otherwise this raging, feeble loyalist would do what little he could to avenge Carol by raising the alarm against Chet. He couldn't ride. Old as he was, and now still further weakened by this wound, he couldn't saddle a horse or stay on one. With the phone smashed, he would be helpless.

Chet left him weeping bitterly because he could not kill the man he believed had kidnaped his mistress.

HE rode away, Typhoon still trailing him. Chet had forgotten Typhoon. The big outlaw trailed bewilderedly. In coming into this valley, he remembered trailing the dun horse for a long time. In two seasons as rodeo's most unridable horse, Typhoon had grown quite accustomed to being halter-led. He did not even resent it. And by now he'd come to like Chet. That last terrific battle of the day before had done something most peculiar to Typhoon's mental processes. Chet had him beaten, then. And in the outraged, desperate pride of one who has always been unconquerable Typhoon would have fought until he died. But Chet had dismounted, leaving him unconquered.

Very dimly, the big horse was seeing something very difficult for a horse to understand. It was less an idea than a feeling. But Typhoon realized, however vaguely, that Chet felt for him something like the quaint fondness a gelding—like Typhoon—will display for a colt. Protective. Affectionate. He was not an enemy. And the ending of that furious battle somehow had shown Chet as not even an antagonist.

Typhoon couldn't understand it. He followed at the end of the lead-rope, his head held high and not dragged forward by the dun horse. They had stopped at a house. There had been two loud noises and a man had given off that smell of blood which is of all odors most terrible to a horse. Now they were going somewhere else.

Typhoon traveled alertly, watching Chet. They came to a certain place where thin ropes reached from one branchless tree to another. Typhoon knew them as harmless. Most ropes must be watched. These need not be. Chet waited behind a clump of saplings where he could see the level floor of the valley. He smoked, not noticing Typhoon. His hands were shaking. His eyes were burning. His face was the color of a dead man Typhoon had seen once, after a killer horse got through with a rider he'd thrown when there was no other human near.

Then a little speck on the Valley's grassy floor. A horse and his rider, following almost exactly the line of telephone-poles which to Typhoon were merely harmless ropes. That man came nearer and nearer. He began to look about as if searching for someone.

Then Chet rode out to meet him, with a glittering thing shining in his hand. It was one of those things that make loud noises, and sometimes one smells blood afterward. The other man turned and squawked strangely. There was something bright and glittering on his chest. The other man held his hands up above his head as Chet rode up to him. Chet spoke in a tone very different from the voice he used in speaking to Typhoon. Typhoon would not like Chet to use that voice to him.

The big horse could not possibly understand the words, of course. But he could feel the deadliness in Chet's tone as he said very softly:

"I'm the fella that called you up, Sheriff. You' goin' to lead me to de Aviguez's hideout. Willin' or unwillin', unharmed or with more things done to you than an Injun ever thought of, you' goin' to take me to wheah de Aviguez is! Understan' me?"

The Sheriff understood. Chet meant it.

CHAPTER XIV

CHET slung the Sheriff's heavy gun-belt about himself. He considered coldly and started to uncoil his lariat. But he might possibly need that. He moved over to Typhoon and loosened the lead-rope. Then he took off even Typhoon's halter.

"Yeah," said Chet quietly. "Turning you loose, Typhoon. I'm hopin' you make out. Keep clear o' men an' fight hard, fella."

He turned back and roped the Sheriff securely in his saddle. The Sheriff had become a sickly color. He had seen Typhoon once before, the first time he tried to arrest Chet. The night after Buck's disappearance—only last night as a matter of fact—his two deputies had tried to take Typhoon out of the little corral behind the Hanks' house. The fearless and deadly onslaught of the big outlaw drove the deputies out of the enclosure. His scornful evasion of attempts to rope him, his utter readiness to battle with hoofs and teeth, had made him far from a desirable acquisition. The deputies were glad enough to leave him alone, when they found out what he was like.

The end of the lead-rope fastened the Sheriff's horse to Chet's.

"We' goin' to find de Aviguez," Chet told him quietly. "If we don't get theah, you' goin' to die. You were runnin' this man-hunt from a telephone down in Alminas. You ought to be able to dodge your posses. Which way do we go?"

The Sheriff protested. Indignantly. Eloquently. Chet looked at him.

"Carol Bradley's dead," he explained gently. "Gawd knows what she went through before she died. De Aviguez killed her, so's Wallace would forget to do somethin' till de Aviguez could do it first, an' so I'd be killed by the first decent man that could line up sights on me. So you' goin' to take me to de Aviguez, an' I ain't a bit particular how I make you. Which way do we go?"

The Sheriff opened his mouth to protest further. But Chet continued to look at him. The Sheriff choked suddenly.

"W-we go straight on just like we're going," he said in a thin voice.

"Right," said Chet. "You tell me when I go wrong."

He led the way.

It was not an impressive procession. Chet rode in the lead on a dun horse. The Sheriff followed at the end of a ten-foot lead-rope instead of the longer line Typhoon had been granted. Two men and two horses, no more, with the second man bound firmly in his saddle. They moved along an ill-defined trail that wound between small hills, then larger one, and then small mountains and later along the flanks of veritable monsters of earth and stone with forests growing on them.

But before they had gone so far, Typhoon did a queer thing. When the two-man cavalcade started off, Typhoon watched curiously. Chet went on without a glance behind. He vanished around the first turn in the trail. Typhoon looked after him puzzledly, then almost wistfully. He dropped his head as if to crop at the grass about him. Then he stared bewilderedly all around. There were no fence-bars anywhere near. Not any at all.

The big horse seemed dumb-founded. For what seemed minutes he stood stock-

still, turning his head here and there and everywhere to look for a fence. It was unparalleled in Typhoon's experience. He had been foaled on the open range, to be sure. As a yearling, as a two-year-old, even as a three-year-old he had been as free as the air about him, grazing the wild grass in the summer and pawing away the snow in winter for forage. Then he was trapped and the process of taming begun, but never finished. Somewhere back in Typhoon's ancestry there was a strain of spirit, of wild and untamable pride, which cropped up in him as a colt and grew with his growth. In his career he'd smashed up the first buster who mounted him, in quick and competent succession dumped that buster's half-dozen successors, and made himself known as the one unridable horse on his home ranch. As a three-year-old he was bought for rodeo use for his prowess as an outlaw. And for two full seasons thereafter he had remained unridden.

NOW he was free again, and he did not understand it. During his time as a rodeo outlaw he had not been for one instant wholly free. There were times when he was led at the end of a rope. There were crowded, hectic moments when he fought with fierce pride and every atom of continually-increasing skill to unseat men who presumed to get astride him. There were weeks and months when he grazed peacefully in a strong corral. But never was he wholly free.

Now, he could not grasp the idea. There had always been a fence, and therefore there must still be a fence. But Typhoon liked Chet. In the little corral behind the squatter's shack he'd always watched Chet until he was clean out of sight, when Chet rode away on the dun. More than once he'd even moved, to keep him in sight a little longer. Not as a sign of subjection, but simply because—well—he liked Chet.

Now Chet was gone again, leaving him in this empty place where there were no fences visible. He moved, to see if Chet would again be in view. He was not. But neither was there a fence.

Typhoon walked puzzledly to Chet's trail. He sniffed at it. He followed it a little. Still no fence. He broke into a leisurely trot, watching out alertly for the boundary of this corral in which he had undoubtedly been placed.

There was Chet, riding ahead with that other man and horse trailing exactly as Typhoon had so often trailed. Chet went on. Typhoon watched until he vanished, then puzzledly moved forward until he could see him again.

He stopped and cropped at grass. Then he trotted to catch another glimpse of Chet.

When the Sheriff mentioned him, he was a hundred yards higher on a mountainside than the riding men, and quite even with them on their way.

"Uh—there's that yellow horse," said the Sheriff. "Up there on the hillside. See?"

Chet turned his head. Typhoon was standing, one fore-hoof lifted, gazing down at the pair. At Chet's movement he snorted and whirled away. He vanished.

"See him?" insisted the Sheriff.

"Yeah," said Chet tonelessly. "How much farther to de Aviguez's place?"

"Four or five miles yet." The Sheriff tried to treat it casually. "He usually goes out by car from Alminas. Uh—had that horse long?"

Chet did not answer. He was not interested. He could not be interested in anything that did not lead to de Aviguez. The Sheriff sweated a little. Chet had reason to quarrel with him. That painstaking lie by which he'd trapped Chet in the Alminas jail. The short, decisive scrap when Chet shot his way out. Some men would hold a grudge for that, even a killing grudge. Chet hadn't mentioned it. He acted as if he'd forgotten it. And the Sheriff, as a politician, felt a painful suspicion of people who conceal their grudges. But if Chet held a grudge, maybe he intended to kill the Sheriff, too, as soon as he'd located and killed de Aviguez.

The Sheriff sweated further. A quarter mile on he pointed out Typhoon again. Then the yellow outlaw was in their rear. Half a mile still, and he was downhill from them. He darted ahead, sometimes, and they came in sight of him grazing comfortably. When they appeared he dashed out of sight like the wild thing he was pretending to be. It became a game, this hide-and-seek, which Typhoon played as if it were a substitute for the combats Chet had tacitly abandoned.

But Chet paid no attention. Typhoon played the game alone.

The Sheriff grew desperate because of the failure of all attempts at conversation. He tried one opening after another until

he found that the only subject on which Chet seemed to hear him speak was de Aviguez.

"Uh—how is it you're so sure Mr. de Aviguez did this job?" he asked at last.

"He 'ranged for Carol to go some place," said Chet evenly. "He hired Lisbeth Hanks to say I wanted to speak to her. He paid her twenty dollars to tell that lie."

"But why would Miss Bradley go to a place to meet you?" he asked. "Why shouldn't you go to the ranchhouse? Did she make a practice—"

Chet told him shortly of their engagement, of meetings away from the JW because of Wallace's dislike.

THE Sheriff began to see safety ahead if he could keep Chet talking. A talking man rarely acts.

"But even if somebody—uh—took Miss Bradley to some place," he insisted, "it wasn't bound to be Mr. de Aviguez."

"No?" said Chet without intonation. "Lisbeth told me he hired her to do it. She suggested it to him. She hadda reason to hate Carol, an' de Aviguez stopped at her pa's house an' offered five hundred dollars if he'd set a trap for me."

"Huh!" said the Sheriff. "All this must have happened last night. He didn't have any grudge against you then!"

"I bought a mine," said Chet shortly.

"But what's that got to do with it?"

Then Chet told him. He told the Sheriff everything that associated de Aviguez and Wallace with the mine and the two skeletons again sealed in the depths of that long-deserted shaft. He added, detachedly, his own interpretation of the facts he narrated, putting them with de Aviguez's known fondness for the sort of pleasure which is achieved by inflicting pain, with the details of his father's last exit from the Hanks' shack, and with various stray items which welded the whole into an unassailable structure of logical inference.

"Theah were two skeletons down in the mine," said Chet at the end. "I looked at the top one, but I didn't touch him. That was your job. I didn't see the other one close. But rememberin', now, I'm right certain that the other skeleton fits into what I' just told you."

The Sheriff stared feverishly at the mountainsides round about. He understood all that Chet had told him. He believed every word of it, down to the last least inference and the most important of deductions. The Sheriff not only believed, but he *knew* that Chet was right. Because he had been a grown man and in politics for a long time in Fighting Horse Valley. The alliance between Wallace and de Aviguez had always possessed its peculiar aspects. This tale explained them. And the Sheriff had been receiving orders and suggestions from de Aviguez ever since Chet came in the Valley, and this tale explained them, too. He knew more about the politics of Fighting Horse Valley than ever before, after Chet's unimpassioned recital.

Typhoon started out of brush a bare fifty yards away, snorting, and went on ahead. But he stopped while still in view and looked curiously at Chet. It seemed odd to Typhoon that Chet paid him no attention at all. He liked Chet.

The ridden horses went on. Chet was silent again. The Sheriff sweated and raced his brains. If he could get rid of Chet, knowing what he knew now. . . .

A spidery line of telephone-poles. The Sheriff wondered desperately if they had been sighted anywhere, if by any possible chance an ambush was already being prepared. Anybody who saw them would know, of course, that Chet had the Sheriff prisoner and would shoot him at the first sign of trouble. Everybody knew that Chet should be shot on sight. And the Sheriff had been directing a far-flung hunt for Chet, investigating every wild rumor that Chet had been sighted. He'd done all that by telephone, and this telephone-wire led to a fire-warden's cabin at the bottom of a fire-tower. Wallace and the JW hands were hunting savagely about this very spot. There ought to be somebody there. If someone were atop the tower. . . .

"De Aviguez's place is at the end of this phone-line," said the Sheriff hoarsely. He was frightened, but even a politician has his moments of courage when the reward is plain enough and near enough at hand.

Chet turned unquestioningly. He could have seen the fire-tower ahead, but apparently he did not. He took his gun from its holster and inspected it in the detached, meticulous fashion of a workman looking over a tool he is about to use for an important task. The Sheriff sweated freely. He was gambling. He suddenly realized that he might be gambling with his life. If they'd been seen from the tower, or if

they were seen while approaching, all would be well. Somebody'd shoot Chet down without warning and the Sheriff would be safe. But if they weren't sighted in time; if Chet rode out into the little clearing and half a dozen men wasted precious seconds staring at him before they opened fire—Then the Sheriff would suffer. And the vision made him turn an ashen gray.

BEHIND them, Typhoon waited for Chet to appear. He'd gone ahead of the men and waited to be surprised. Chet did not come. Typhoon pricked up his ears for the sound of Chet's approach. Then he would snort ferociously and plunge away. But the silence was unbroken. Typhoon ceased to crop the grass and raised his head inquisitively. He heard the rattle of a trod-on stone. It was off to the right. The big yellow horse gazed in that direction, his ears erect, his nostrils twitching.

Nothing happened. He went back along the way he had come, whiffing the air. He saw where the trail branched, under those stationary ropes which did not need to be watched. Typhoon was bothered. He went back along the original trail. Chet had vanished. And now the pattern of action which made Typhoon wish to keep Chet in sight was fixed. He returned to the branching of the trail, his horse-brains puzzled and quaintly concerned. He seemed to come to a decision. He trotted briskly along the branch beneath the phone-wires.

His snort of satisfaction when he sighted Chet again made the Sheriff's hair stand on end and made him jump so frantically that his bond-ropes hurt. The Sheriff thought someone had come up from behind.

But it was only Typhoon. And the big yellow horse was very much pleased with himself for discovering Chet when he seemed to be lost. He came trotting up to a position some thirty feet behind the dun horse, exactly the length of the lead-rope Chet had removed.

Chet still could not take his thoughts from his mission of vengeance. He saw Typhoon. He nodded to him. He even spoke to him abstractedly. In turning to do so while he rode, he missed a clear view of the fire-warden's tower between two trees. A man was running frantically down the tower from the top. The Sheriff's heart stood still. If Chet saw that. . . .

But Chet rode on.

Two hundred yards along the trail. Three hundred yards. A quarter of a mile. Typhoon watched Chet. The Sheriff shook visibly, sweat pouring down his ashen-gray face. Chet rode in an apathetic calm.

Then a clearing opened out before them. It was small, not more than half an acre. A tiny, two-room cabin in which the telephone-line came to an end. The high, slender, timber tower of the fire-warden service. No human being in sight. No horse, even. Absolute silence. Absolute stillness.

But Chet stared, his gun half out. This was plainly something quite other than de Aviguez's hide-out. Chet's lips set grimly. He swung in his saddle, his eyes deadly.

"You said this would be de Aviguez's place—"

"CRACK!" A rifle crashed in the cabin. A puff of smokeless-powder vapor appeared before a window. An instantaneous shrill whine. . . .

Chet jerked as something struck him. He was half-turned in his saddle. The impact of the bullet striking completed his unbalancing. He went reeling and sagging heavily out of his saddle. He hit the ground with an audible thud.

A moment's stillness. The Sheriff caught his breath. Chet lay still on the earth. Then the Sheriff shouted joyfully:

"Got him! Come on out! You got him!"

A cautious pause. Then a man appeared in the doorway of the cabin. He carried a rifle in his hands, ready to fire again. He came forward. The Sheriff babbled joyfully. Typhoon stirred. He had jumped at the crack of the rifle. Now his nostrils quivered to the smell of blood, of all scents most horrible to a horse. He looked instinctively for Chet. And Chet was not in his saddle!

Typhoon moved anxiously to see Chet. He saw him on the ground. The smell of blood grew stronger. Shuddering, Typhoon moved closer. He remembered a dead man he'd seen once, when a killer horse finished with a rider he'd thrown when there was no other human nearby. Chet on the ground. The smell of blood. . . .

Eyes rolling affrightedly, Typhoon approached Chet, his ears laid back and his every muscle taut. He was bewildered. He suddenly knew that he felt toward Chet very much as a gelding will feel toward a colt. Protective. Affectionate.

Then a man with a shining thing in his

hand approached Chet. He grinned. He smelled of evil. He bent down to touch Chet.

Something snapped in Typhoon's brain. Squealing, he plunged forward, the horror of the smell of blood forgotten. He liked Chet. This man had harmed him. Typhoon did not understand how, but he knew the fact by instinct. He was a hurricane of destruction, with bared teeth and flailing hoofs. . . .

A gun went off close to his chest. The flame seared his hide, and Typhoon screamed in sheer maniacal fury. With teeth and hoofs he assailed the man who had shot Chet and then approached his body.

It was far from pretty to watch.

CHAPTER XV

CHET felt the impact of hoofs upon earth, seemingly within inches of his head. He was conscious, but the numbing effect of a heavy, low-velocity bullet is great. There was no pain. That would come later. He'd felt something strike his shoulder, the left one. Then he saw the earth rising to meet him and somehow his body did not respond to his will. He could not even raise his arms to break the shock of his fall. He hit the ground, and very mercifully his feet did not stick in the stirrups, and he lay in a heap, really conscious only of great weariness.

Then he heard the Sheriff shout. A little later his ear—the one resting on the ground—told him a horse was approaching hesitantly. That, he realized detachedly, would be Typhoon. He heard Typhoon whiff the salty smell of blood and almost felt the big animal's shudder. Then a man came near. Chet could not see, but he felt the impacts of the man's boots on the ground.

There was a faint roaring in Chet's ears. It might be approaching unconsciousness. But he felt the man very near indeed. He felt a shadow upon him. Something touched him.

Then Typhoon squealed and Chet heard the scurrying rush of his hoofs. The man above Chet whirled away. A gun roared thunderously. Chet felt a vague surprise that he did not feel the impact of another bullet. Then he heard Typhoon scream.

The scream of a horse in pain is ghastly, but a horse's scream of rage is like no other sound on earth. Wounded, dazed, numbed as Chet was, that scream sent shivers over him. He instinctively tried to stir. He moved one hand. A foot shifted. He tried again.

Hoofs pounded by close to him. A huge yellow body plunged past so near that he felt the wind of its movement. There was an indescribable thud. A man cried out, a thin high shriek of terror. Another blow. Steel clattered against iron—Typhoon's shod hoof. Typhoon emitted a sound which was almost a bellow. His hoofs pounded on the earth again. And then a man uttered a choked cry, and after that there was only a confused, worrying sound, and blows repeated and re-repeated.

Chet made a tremendous effort and turned over. He found that one arm was of no use to him, but with the other he managed at last to sit up, leaning on it. He raised his head.

Typhoon, some twenty yards away, pawed the ground at a horrible thing upon the earth. He backed away, his nostrils distended, snorting. He was infinitely ready for another deadly dash and a still more terrible mangling of the object that was already quite shapeless. His hoofs were stained.

"My Gawd!" said Chet dazedly.

At the sound of his voice, Typhoon whirled. He came swiftly. He stretched out his neck to Chet. He even whinnied softly.

"An' you," said Chet faintly, "you' the horse that never let me put my foot across y'back without startin' to fight to beat hell!"

He struggled to rise, Typhoon hovering solicitously near. There was nothing within reach by which Chet could lift himself up. And he was curiously sick. He reached out his hand to Typhoon. The big horse came even closer. And Chet clung to his neck. Typhoon looked at him bewilderedly and as by instinct pulled up against the weight—though he did not draw back—and Chet put his own remaining strength into his legs and stood staggering on his feet.

"Good work, fella," he said, panting a little from the hard labor of standing upright. "Now we' goin' over to that shack. I' got to tie up this hole in me before goin' on."

He stumbled toward the cabin at the foot of the fire-tower. He wavered on his feet. A bullet striking the bone in a man's

shoulder is not especially painful. A small, high-velocity bullet will bore a clean hole and go through. But a heavy one stops, and the shock-effect is tremendous. Chet's progress to the cabin was precarious, was drunken. Once he lost his balance and regained it only by a wild clutch at Typhoon.

THE cabin drew near. Chet leaned against the door and hoisted himself painfully up the solitary step to the interior. His hand was on his gun-butt as he peered inside.

"Chet!" gasped a voice within. "For Gawd's sake! Cut us loose again before—"

Chet blinked dizzily.

"Mmh. Sam an' Dick Hanks," he said faintly. "How'd you get heah?"

He fumbled in his pocket. He brought out a knife. He balanced himself uncertainly and cut a rope. He handed over the knife and sat down weakly in a chair.

"You boys'll come in handy," he said an instant later. "Maybe. See if theah's somethin' around to tie up this hole in me. An' if theah's a drink handy."

One brother released the other. The two Hanks boys were white and desperate and very dusty. Both of them were badly scratched. Their clothes were torn. Dick sent his younger brother to search for bandage-material and a bottle. He cut away Chet's shirt.

"Bullet went in an' stayed," he reported swiftly. "Bleedin' some, but not so much. That fella come runnin' down the tower, jumped in heah, an' grabbed a gun, an' shot out the window. We didn't know what it was all about till you come staggerin' up to the door. What's happened? They' chasin' you for lettin' us loose?"

"Hell, no!" said Chet. "I'm supposed to've kidnaped Carol Bradley. Actually, de Aviguez got her an' killed her. I'm on my way to find him, soon as you fix me up. The Sheriff's outside, tied up on his horse. One o' mine's theah, too. Better wait a minute. Typhoon's raisin' hell. He just killed the fella that shot me. Wait till I can talk to him."

Typhoon's long head peered in the doorway. Chet spoke reassuringly to him. The big horse fidgeted outside. Sam Hanks came back with strips of white cloth. A half-full bottle.

"Good!" said Chet, reaching out his hand. "Tie up my shoulder an' give me a drink o' that, an' I'll be good as new. How'd you fellas get heah?"

"Tryin' to get away," said Dick Hanks tersely, working quickly and rather clumsily. "We lit out for up the valley. Had to take some narrow trails that never were meant for cars, anyway. First one we tried had got blocked by a landslide. We had to back a coupla miles before we could turn the car around. We started to take another one we knew. Fella started slingin' lead at the tires. We ducked. Looked like all the valley was ragin' around slingin' lead. We knew a trail up heah. We didn't think we could take the car all the way through, but it was faster'n walkin', anyways."

Sam Hanks was rummaging again. He appeared with bread and cold meat, eating voraciously.

"We' better get on the move," he observed. "Wheah' you goin', Chet?"

Dick began to bandage the shoulder, clumsily and yet with a definite gentleness.

"As we were headin' through that trail, about half a mile from heah it was, somebody yelled to us to stop. Sam was drivin'. He stepped on the gas. We lit out ahead, hell-for-leather, the car bouncin' an' jumpin' an' the fella that'd yelled slingin' lead our way. We got around a curve an' theah was four other fellas ridin' hard to head us off. Sam tried to ram a way through. But the car bounced pretty bad. We were makin' sixty on a horse-trail. It couldn't be steered. We hit somethin' an' the car turned over. It was JW men. They pulled us out, about ravin'. They wan'ed to know wheah you were. They'd heard about you turnin' us loose from the jail. We didn't know wheah you were, o' course. They roped us an' brought us heah for the Sheriff to come get."

He fastened the last knot and stepped back. Chet stood upright. His shoulder, naturally, was still numb. It would be hours, probably, before it became so painful as such a wound ought to be. But the staunching of the blood-flow and the monstrous drink he had gulped down from the bottle brought back strength. He stood up and walked with only a trace of unsteadiness to the door.

"I'll keep Typhoon kinda interested," he said quietly. "While you fellas bring the dun an' the Sheriff's horse over heah. Maybe I can turn his horse over to you for a getaway. I'm goin' to need the dun."

HE leaned against the door-frame and talked to Typhoon. And that puzzled animal came closer, and closer, and Chet scratched his ears. Typhoon was in something of a mental turmoil. On the one hand there was the lifelong habit of regarding all men as enemies. On the other there was his well-established liking for Chet. And to that last was now added a vague but positive conviction that Chet was not an enemy or even an antagonist, and the sort of warm feeling one always has for something one has fought for.

But from the look in his eyes as he turned to regard the Hanks boys leading the other two horses to the cabin, anybody could tell two things about him. One was that he would never let anybody else harm Chet as long as he could lift a hoof in Chet's defense. The other was that he would never harm Chet, himself.

The Sheriff was stricken dumb when his mount reached the cabin door.

"Take him off that horse, fellas," said Chet quietly. "He lied t'me. Tried to get me trapped. He tol' me this was de Aviguez's place. Bring him in heah. He's goin' to tell the truth, now."

The Sheriff whimpered as the Hanks boys brought him inside. They laid him on the floor.

"I don't know how much guts you got," said Chet gently, "but you' goin' to need all of 'em if you try to hold out on me now. Or do you want to tell the truth?"

The Sheriff gasped his willingness to do anything, to tell anything, rather than have Chet take the measures he was ruthlessly ready for. Carol in de Aviguez's hands would have made Chet utterly merciless in extracting the information he needed to find her. But Carol dead at de Aviguez's hands. . . . There was absolutely nothing he would stop at.

The Sheriff sobbed in pure panic as Chet bent above him.

"Wheah's de Aviguez's hide-out?" asked Chet softly.

The Sheriff told him, volubly. It was still a long distance away, and it was very near a reasonably good motor-road so it could be reached quickly from Alminas.

"You boys," said Chet. "Y'know this place? You' roamed around a lot in the hills."

The Hanks boys were dubious.

"Give us a few more details," suggested Chet.

The Sheriff babbled. He told the way, in detail. From here to there, and turn left at such a place, then up a little draw. . . .

"Mmm," said Dick Hanks. "Yeah. 'Seems to me I remember seein' a dirt road with car-tracks on it, goin' that way. I figured it might lead to an old prospect hole."

"It's wheah de Aviguez throws a party now an' then," said Chet in a stilly calm, "for a few selec' friends."

"It'd be a good place," agreed Sam Hanks. "Right close to a good road, but nobody'd be goin' in theah."

"I'm ridin' that way, then," said Chet grimly. "I think I'll take the Sheriff along too, just in case he's lied a secon' time."

In the distance a horse's hoofs clattered on stone. The horse was moving fast. The two Hanks boys paled.

"Those JW fellas! Comin' back!"

Chet listened.

"Not but one horse," he said composedly. "We c'd use that. I don't need it, but you fellas do."

"We ain't got any guns!" said Sam despairingly.

"I have," said Chet.

Again the thudding of hoofs. Nearer, now. Dick Hanks peered out the window.

"It's Mistuh Wallace! By himself!"

"Sheriff," said Chet softly, "if you yell to warn him, I'll blow you to hell! Sam an' Dick, he's comin' heah to use the phone an' find out if anybody's seen me. He'll come in blind. You get on both sides o' the door. When he sees me, you jump him. If I have to, I'll plug him so's he can't kill anybody. But if we don't grab him an' tie him up, he'll kill all three of us. You know it, him findin' you heah with me!"

Chet himself was in no shape to offer battle. The two Hanks boys were gangling and not at their full strength, but Wallace should be past his.

The thudding hoofs were very near, now. Chet could see Wallace through the open door. And the older man was racing toward the fire-warden's cabin. It had been in some sort a reporting-point for the hunt that was being made for Chet. And it was the natural place for a man half-mad with worry to go to, when his own searchers found no sign of a kidnaper and a girl, to ask in desperate hope if they'd been located anywhere else. Wallace's face was as white as his hair. He rode mercilessly.

He saw horses by the cabin door and failed to note the shapeless, stained heap on the ground that had been a man before Typhoon reached him.

"Pete!" he shouted hoarsely. "Pete! Any word?"

HE came racing on. He flung himself from his horse and came in the doorway. He saw figures within, but his eyes were dazed by the sudden change from bright afternoon sunlight to shadow.

"Heard anything?" he demanded desperately. "Anything about Carol?"

Dick Hanks leaped upon him from behind. Sam Hanks joined in the battle. Wallace went down, taken utterly unaware. His gun fell from its holster and Chet went unsteadily forward and kicked it away.

Had Wallace been warned, he could have put up a better battle even unarmed. But he was breathless. He was desperate for news. He was half-insane from terror on Carol's account and from hatred of the man he thought had kidnaped her. When hurtling bodies flung him to the floor, he cried savagely that he was Wallace of the JW. He called them fools. He thought, of course, the attack was a stupid mistake.

But Dick Hanks got an unskillful but complete full-nelson on him, and Sam Hanks held his legs. Then Chet passed Sam a rope and he looped the struggling legs together, brought up the rope, and captured the flailing fists in successive half-hitches. All the while Wallace panted in fury, though utterly without fear.

"I reg'n," said Chet coldly, "you can turn him over now."

The Hanks boys drew back. Sam Hanks picked up the revolver Chet had kicked away. Dick Hanks took the helpless Wallace by the shoulders and heaved him to a sitting position against the wall.

Then Wallace saw Chet.

The ropes that bound him creaked and stretched as he fought them. His eyes started from his head. Foam appeared on his lips. A cry burst from him which was not words, was not even a curse, but was such inarticulate, such terrible hatred and rage that even Typhoon stirred, outside.

Chet nodded.

"Look heah, suh," he said quietly. "De Aviguez's gone an' kidnaped Carol. Not me. You'll get proof o' that presently. I aim to get de Aviguez. So I'm goin' to take you along to watch."

He went, not very steadily, to the door. Wallace's horse waited patiently, its reins dropped to the ground.

"Put him back on his horse, fellas," said Chet rather tiredly. "He was right fond o' Carol, too. He's got a right to see the finish. An' I'm takin' the Sheriff just in case he lied. Stick him up theah, likewise."

The two Hanks boys brought the horses closer still. They hoisted the Sheriff in place. They brought Wallace out. He had not uttered a coherent word since sighting Chet. Veins stood out upon his forehead. They seemed to throb with his passion.

"How we goin' to ride?" asked Sam Hanks anxiously.

"You don't want to come with me," said Chet wearily. "Can't y' go off on foot somewheah?"

Dick Hanks said abruptly:

"We better stick to you, Chet. For one thing, you need us. For another, I'm guessin' we need you if we' goin' to make a getaway."

CHET debated. He really needed another drink. The shock of his wound had been severe. He leaned against the door-frame. Two horses left, Typhoon and the dun. Typhoon was unridable. He regarded Chet anxiously, now.

"If one o' you fellas could ride sure-'nough, now," he said heavily. Then, "Nope. It takes all I got to stay on Typhoon when I'm right. Hunt around. Maybe the fella that was guardin' you had a horse somewheah around. He ought to. Look for it."

Sam went hunting. Typhoon stretched out his head toward Chet. Stared at him.

"You got a dam' funny look in your eyes," he observed presently. "If I know horses, you' goin' to stay close by me. You' goin' to crowd me. You' goin' to be a dam' nuisance, Typhoon. Too bad y' didn't get to feelin' this way when I had some strength left. Maybe we'd ha' made a pair."

He was speaking of himself as if already dead, without realizing it. Somehow, he could not imagine living after he'd killed de Aviguez. That was all he was living for now, anyhow. Carol was dead. . . .

Sam Hanks came back with a saddle.

"Heah's a saddle," he reported uneasily, "but no horse. No tellin' wheah it is."

Dick said hopefully:

"We could ride double, Chet."

Chet started to shrug, and his shoulder hurt.

"Hell! 'Tell you. I'll help put a saddle on Typhoon. He'll let me do it, I think. Somehow I' got an idea I'm not goin' to be killed until after de Aviguez's dead. Let's see."

He could not help, really, with only one arm and a vast weariness creeping over him.

In the end he stood by Typhoon's head, soothing him, while the big horse fidgeted unhappily. The two Hanks boys got the saddle on. As they cinched it, a hump began to appear as if involuntarily in the middle of Typhoon's back. It was an incipient buck. But for Chet at his head, Typhoon would have been fighting to get that saddle off.

Chet regarded that hump and shook his head.

"No go, fellas. Get me up on this dun horse heah."

Sam Hanks protested angrily. Dick Hanks snarled at him. He helped Chet to mount.

"You fellas hang on to the stirrups," said Chet. "That'll help some, to get you away from heah."

But Typhoon crowded close as Chet showed signs of moving away. He proposed to travel neck and neck with the dun horse carrying Chet. Chet looked queerly at the long yellow head, turned to regard him solicitously.

"Shucks!" he said suddenly.

He edged the dun horse over until the two animals' flanks touched. Then, painfully and with tremendous effort, he slid over into the saddle on Typhoon. Typhoon quivered. His back arched involuntarily into a hump.

"Yeah?" said Chet.

Again Typhoon quivered. Then, slowly, the hump flattened out. He turned his head and looked anxiously at Chet. And he stood still.

"Pile on that dun horse," said Chet soberly. "Both of you. Haul Wallace an' the Sheriff after you. We' off to get de Aviguez. An' theah' goin' to be no slip-ups this time!"

The extraordinary cavalcade set out soberly through the hills. Typhoon moved —well—almost carefully.

CHAPTER XVI

A TALL and slender peak cast a mile-long shadow across the green flank of a nearer mountainside. Other shadows deepened in the lowlands. The small cavalcade wound slowly toward its destination. Chet led the way, riding on his nerve now, with his wound stiffened and painful and with weakness dragging at him in unpredictable waves.

It was late. From just after sunrise, when he'd fought his way out of the jail in Alminas, Chet had been on the move. He'd learned of Carol's danger no earlier than two o'clock. He'd gotten his wound at something after four. Now it was close to sunset. His jaw was clamped tightly. He sagged forward in his saddle, and then caught himself. The trail slanted. Typhoon surveyed the way wisely and picked a path. The other horses followed in an obedient line.

The Sheriff's voice muttered feverishly. Bound in his saddle, he had yielded to superstition. Everything was against Chet, yet so far Chet was free. A trap in the jail, a whole population aroused and hunting him, an ambush and a wound which should have been deadly, then the coming of the one man who hated him most desperately; all these things by some strange fatality had failed to eliminate Chet from the scheme of things. He was riding an outlaw horse that no living man had ever been able to train to the bridle. He carried a .45 slug in his body and wavered as he rode, from the shock of it, but he still rode.

The hard, the skeptical part of his brain protested clamorously, but the Sheriff was in no mood to heed. He was scared down to the very marrow of his soul.

Babbling a little, choking a little, rushing the words out in a semi-hysterical monotone, he had to talk, and in so doing, he threw away every chance of becoming the dominant political figure of this section by having something on both Wallace and de Aviguez.

So, his teeth chattering, the Sheriff talked. He babbled at Wallace. Everything he had learned from Chet. Not clearly. Not coherently. But in the manner of a panic-stricken man who sees doom

approaching and tries to forestall it by a full confession. He told Wallace of the manner of Carol's being lured from the JW ranchhouse, by Lisbeth because of jealousy and for a twenty-dollar reward from de Aviguez. He told of de Aviguez's arrangements which should have led to the murder of Chet in the Alminas jail, "while resisting arrest." He told the true manner of Buck's disappearance, when he had ridden out of Alminas with the Sheriff and de Aviguez, and had been met by two men whom de Aviguez from time to time caused to be appointed deputy sheriffs, and of Buck's riding away with de Aviguez and with them. And the Sheriff, sobbing in pure, superstitious terror, told what Chet had found in the caved-in mine-shaft and what he deduced from it.

Wallace said no word at first. Perhaps he did not hear, at the beginning. But presently something in the incoherent, oft-repeated phrases sank home, and he listened. And the Sheriff babbled on and babbled on, easing his panic by useless confession, and at long last Wallace was asking hoarse questions . . .

The sun sank behind them. They turned to the left, a small cavalcade moving through semi-darkness. Presently they went up a small draw and a lucent twilight which was almost night lay all over the hills. Now and again a saddle creaked. Once in a great while an iron-shod hoof struck on stone. But the men fell silent. Chet wavered in his saddle. The two Hanks boys brought up the rear. Wallace made no sound, but his silence was taut, a terrific tension which no mere utterance could ease.

THEN, quite without drama, a little cabin came in sight through the deepening obscurity. No light showed in it. Deep car-tracks led past it to a shed beyond. As the horsemen drew near and its outline became distinct, it was quite otherwise than one would expect a hidden cabin in the mountains to be. The cabin before them was elaborate. It had somewhat of the pert daintiness of small hideaways everywhere. It was the sort of place where private parties are given to select groups by persons whose ideas of pleasure require privacy.

But it possessed that curious deadness of appearance all empty buildings show. Chet reined in before it. He moved in his saddle as if to dismount. But Dick Hanks said:

"Nobody heah, Chet! Let me look!"

Chet knew there was nobody there. He felt it. He half-turned to the Sheriff, and the Sheriff whimpered suddenly. Dick Hanks dismounted and moved toward the open door.

"If you' wrong, don't kill de Aviguez," said Chet very quietly.

Dick vanished into the house. They heard him moving about. He came out again.

"Nobody theah," he said shortly. "Folks' been heah recent, though. Inside of half an hour. I'm lookin' in the back."

He moved behind the cabin, while an inarticulate whining noise formed itself in the Sheriff's throat. He shook. Dick Hanks came back.

"Car's heah," he said shortly. "Radiator's still warm. Theah's somebody not far away."

The Sheriff said in thin and high-pitched voice:

"Mr. de Aviguez might have been helping down in the valley. He might have been down there after two o'clock, anyhow."

The Sheriff could not know of de Aviguez's movements after the time he'd set out to meet a man he thought was a smuggler but who turned out to be Chet. Yet it was plausible enough that de Aviguez should have showed himself during the hunt.

"It wouldn't surprise me any," said Chet in a queerly emotionless tone, "if he's out buryin' Carol somewheah now."

Wallace made an indescribable sound.

"She's dead, anyways," Chet said dully. "He had to kill her. He couldn't let her loose to go back an' tell who it was kidnaped her. He kidnaped her so he'd have a chance to clean out that mine. But we'll get him when he comes back, anyhow."

Silence. Then Dick Hanks said harshly:

"Theah! Is that a light?"

He pointed. High up on the mountain-flank. There was no glimmer of flame, but the shadow was deeper here than where the afterglow still touched the western mountainsides. And there was a faint nimbus of light visible among the trees up there.

"Must be a way up theah," said Chet.

Dick Hanks hunted. His voice came back, fifty yards away.

"Heah's a trail. Overgrown, but it'll

do." He struck a match. "Yeah! Wet dirt. Fresh tracks!"

The cavalcade moved forward. Dick Hanks led the way on foot. Typhoon went patiently ahead. He followed the figure on foot because Chet urged him forward. Presently he realized that Dick Hanks was to be his guide. Behind him, the other horses trailed.

The road was old. In places it was overgrown and the horses made a distinct noise brushing through. In other places it was gullied out and soft. Dick Hanks went ahead, searching it out in the fading light, climbing, ever climbing. Once he stopped for breath.

"Like I said," he explained absorbedly to Chet, "theah musta been a old prospect-hole up heah."

Chet said nothing. After an instant Dick went on.

They rose out of the valley, now. Occasionally, when the ancient trail skirted the bold face of a minor cliff, they could see its deeper darkness below them. Stars were coming out, too. And now Dick Hanks added to the constant verification of the trail, the quest for the way in which the horses would make least noise. Chet noted the fact. But Chet was, after all, really incapable of clear thinking on any subject but the killing of de Aviguez. His body was weak. He ought not to be able to sit his horse. He sat in the saddle on Typhoon and rode that twisting, racking climb uphill on nothing but the unalterable fact that it had to be done if he was to reach de Aviguez.

THEN the trail flattened out a little. Through the starlight Chet saw a glow on tree-trunks beyond an intervening clump of larger trees. His one good hand dropped to his gun. He loosened it in the holster, and noted that the weapon seemed extraordinarily heavy.

Dick Hanks came back.

"Nearly theah," he whispered. "What y'want to do, Chet?"

"Take the gun outa my other holster," said Chet. "The one I got from the Sheriff. I'm right weak. If I miss de Aviguez, you kill him. I reg'n theah'll be enough ev'dence up heah to clear you."

The release of that much weight from his left side made an enormous difference in his balance. Chet was very weak indeed. His forehead felt very cold. But aside from that he was aware of practically no sensations.

Dick Hanks led the way onward again. He skirted a clump of saplings. And then he saw where the fire was.

It was in the mouth of a mine-drift, slanting into this hillside exactly like the one Chet planned to reopen. But this one was not caved in. The flames of the fire within it were invisible, yet a ruddy glow poured out upon the ground just outside. And there were three human figures visible in that glow.

Two of them were motionless. The third was de Aviguez. He stood in the glow of the fire, his back to it, gesticulating. There was an odd, mechanical jerkiness in his movements. He seemed like a man made rapt by some vision. His voice had a smooth, purring quality to it, like that of a man fascinated or drugged.

Words formed gradually out of the murmurous sound as the four horses moved almost soundlessly across the thick grass.

"No hurry. . . . The essence of pleasure is its realization after anticipation. . . . I have enjoyed myself today, Carol! . . . You realize, of course, that you must die? Both you and your friend Buck? I have worked hard today, organizing a search for the villain who kidnaped you. The Sheriff is off continuing to organize, now."

He laughed. Dick Hanks stopped. The four horses and the five men stood motionless, staring at de Aviguez from the blackness beyond the firelight. He moved and swayed in an unnatural, ecstatic fashion.

"I had to kidnap you to gain time. To keep your uncle busy so he would not open your admirer's mine until I had been there first. But I combine pleasure with this matter of business! And such pleasure! You understand my plans for the evening, Carol? You realize them fully? Even though I have not so much as kissed you? No pleasure is complete which has not its element of pain. You will provide a part of that element, and even your friend Buck will furnish his share. And when you are no longer amusing, my dear, why—then I provide for myself the pleasure of recollection. And again no pleasure is complete which has not its element of pain. But you two shall provide even that!"

The man was rapt, was fascinated, was hypnotized by the visions of his own contriving. He seemed not altogether sane. He was working himself into a strange

ecstasy of cruelty indulged. The five in the darkness were yet silent. Chet's brain was struggling to readjust itself to the incredible fact that Carol was, she must be alive! Buck Enderby was alive! Carol—

"The climax, the charming aftermath of the evening!" said de Aviguez. His eyes seemed wide and shining. "It is a duplicate of an event of many years ago. The end of the evening's pleasure will be the carrying of you and Buck into this little mine-drift. It may be that you cannot see my preparations. A little dynamite. Can you see? I light a fuse, and you are sealed in forever. A splendid mortuary arrangement."

He laughed, hysterically.

"So much better than that other time. One likes to talk, Carol. One enjoys confiding. And I cannot confide except to such persons as yourself and Buck, who will not repeat what I say. But there was a time, some twenty years ago, when there was a girl for whom I felt an overmastering passion. But I did not understand myself, then. I was clumsy. I lost all control of myself. She was the wife of your esteemed uncle, Carol. She was very beautiful, and she came into my office to consult me upon some legal matter and, regarding her, I lost my head. Her rage was astonishing, my dear. It matched your own when you found yourself trapped today. But I had lost my head completely and she was somewhat—marked by my attempted caresses. And she would not swear to keep silence. Which meant that Wallace would have killed me, if the scandal were not enough to ruin me in any case. . . ."

AMONG the five men watching from the darkness a feeling of intolerable tension grew up. De Aviguez talked on, working himself up into an ecstasy of sheer cruelty. The five men watched. . . .

"But Wallace was my friend. And, regarding her dead upon the floor of my office, I thought swiftly. He was insanely jealous. Of that you have seen symptoms, Carol! And there was a handsome young engineer about, named Holliday. Yes, my dear, Chet Holliday's father. He had been in charge of the boring of that mine-drift your admirer so imprudently bought. So I sent Holliday a note, asking him to come to see me at once. He came—after dark. And so I arranged a comedy! I went to Wallace, already disturbed at the absence of his wife. I told him I had discovered an amour between her and Holliday. Even then, I told him, they made a rendezvous in the very mine-shaft Holliday had dug for gold and now found convenient for love-making. Wallace was nearly mad from anxiety. He became insane with jealousy. I took him to the mine. I showed him the horses of the pair, tethered nearby. And I worked upon Wallace cleverly. I persuaded him that if they were guilty, they deserved no less than to have the mine blown down upon them. And if they were not in there, there was assuredly no harm in blasting shut an already abandoned mine! He blew it shut with dynamite that had been left there and fled away, sobbing. He was nearly mad with anguish! A pretty comedy! If he had elected to make sure of their guilt by going in to look, I would have had to blow down the shaft upon him, too! I could not have him find his wife and Holliday together, but stabbed and with my own knife entangled in the muscles of Holliday's back! . . ."

He laughed almost hysterically, weaving back and forth upon his feet.

"And to think that but a little while since I was frightened! Because your admirer, Carol, had gone in the mine and found out just what I did not wish your uncle to learn! I thought myself ruined! But do you see how I have retrieved the situation? I kidnaped you and threw the blame on young Holliday. On Chet. And now all the Valley is hunting him. They will kill him on sight, and *then* look for you! No one thinks of the mine now, Wallace least of all! And I have gained so much time that I can indulge myself in an evening of unalloyed pleasure before I go to the mine and remove all evidence of my past indiscretion! I admire myself for that! It is cleverness itself! Which is conceit, but one does not often have a chance to brag!"

Carol's voice came clearly, full of loathing.

"You're a devil! A devil!"

It was her voice which broke the spell. De Aviguez laughed. But from the darkness Chet's voice came coldly:

"He ain't a devil yet, Carol, but he's sure headed for hell!"

He fumbled out his gun. It was very heavy. He raised it as de Aviguez froze in a pose of stark, incredulous amazement.

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Then the little man leaped wildly for the shadows as Chet's gun roared.

He did not reach the shadows. He went down with a shriek of utter terror. But unfortunately, he was not dead. Chet slid off his horse to go to him, and Carol gasped his name. Dick Hanks went to de Aviguez. He very competently prevented the terror-stricken man from crawling off into the darkness with a shattered leg. He dragged him back into the firelight while de Aviguez shrilly offered bribes, confessions, incredible concessions if only his life were spared.

It was Chet who cut loose the ropes around Carol, and Carol who released Buck. And Chet said unsteadily, because the reaction was tremendous:

"You can cut Wallace loose, Buck. An' the Sheriff too. He's a crook, the Sheriff is, but he'll play square now. He's got to."

Buck moved stiffly. He said no word. He took the knife from Chet and limped toward the horses. But on the way he passed close to de Aviguez. And still wordlessly, but with entire deliberation, Buck measured the distance and let go a terrific blow which connected accurately with de Aviguez's jaw. And that was that.

IT was the next afternoon when Chet and Carol started to go back from Alminas toward de Aviguez's cabin. They'd gotten in during the night in de Aviguez's car, with the Sheriff driving and abjectly excusing himself for all past behavior. And Carol told certain prominent citizens the story of her capture, and after that it was impossible to go back after de Aviguez. He'd have been lynched. But he could not escape with Buck and Wallace and the two Hanks boys to guard him.

Now, though, Alminas was considerably calmed down.

Carol prepared to take the wheel of a borrowed car. Chet was rather white and weak, though there was no longer a .45 bullet in him and he was assured that he was simply too tough to kill. They were going after de Aviguez, Chet being deputized for the purpose. The Sheriff lifted his hat elaborately to them as Carol stepped up on the running-board.

But before she even seated herself, Carol stopped. A knot of horsemen was coming in, the horses' hoofs clattering on the hard-surfaced road. A huge yellow horse trailed behind them.

"There's Buck!" said Carol queerly. "And Typhoon! And the Hanks boys! Where's Uncle?"

Chet stared. His eyes narrowed. If de Aviguez had gotten away. . . .

Buck halted alongside the car.

"H'llo, Chet! You' lookin' good, considerin'. For Gawd's sake take this heah yellow horse off my han's! He's wild, huntin' for you! Theah—look at him!"

Typhoon saw Chet. He brushed a way through all obstacles and pressed close to Chet. Chet stroked his head.

"But wheah's de Aviguez?" he demanded.

"And Uncle?" asked Carol uneasily.

Buck gazed fixedly at some object in the distance.

"Theah was a—uh—a accident," he said awkwardly. "After you all left, we got kinda hungry. It sorta looked like rain, too. So these fellas an' me, we went down to de Aviguez's cabin to get us some grub, an' while we were theah it came on to rain like hell—excuse me, Miss Carol."

"Go on!" she said more uneasily still.

"When it was all over we went back up." Then Buck began to talk very rapidly. "An' all we can figure out, ma'm, is that Mistuh Wallace musta taken de Aviguez in that theah drift to get outa the rain, an' theah was some dynamite in theah, as we got good reason to know, ma'm, an'—uh—maybe it was lightnin', or maybe a spark from the fire, but anyways that dynamite went off an' blew it to hell."

Silence. After seconds, Buck uneasily turned his head. Carol's eyes were full of tears. Her lips were twisted. Buck looked quickly at Chet and showed him the edge of a folded paper in his pocket. It was enough. Chet knew that paper would be from Wallace.

"An' now—uh—ma'm, I'm goin' in the café heah an' talk to my girl," said Buck firmly. "I never thought I was goin' to see her again!"

He slid off his horse and went inside. Carol turned blindly away from the car. Her eyes brimmed over. She looked helplessly up at Chet. Typhoon edged hopefully closer, wistfully seeking attention.

"He—he did it," said Carol unsteadily. "Finding out—after all these years. . . . Uncle didn't want to keep on living. I—don't blame him, knowing him as I do. I—think he's happier, Chet. And—I've got you, haven't I?"

She leaned unashamedly upon Chet's unwounded shoulder and cried softly.

"You got all that's left of me," said Chet. "For always. An' Typhoon, too."

The lowliest and least-considered white man in Alminas was rarely to be seen during daylight hours away from his goatskin rug upon his doorstep. But today was different. It was an emergency. He was out of tobacco. And he came out upon the main street of Alminas and saw that pose: Carol sobbing softly upon Chet's shoulder and Chet patting her comfortingly, while Typhoon regarded the pair from a position as close to Chet as he could manage to get.

The lowliest and least-considered white man in Alminas stopped and stared. Then he nodded his head profoundly.

"Yes, suh!" he said in the deepest conviction. "It's Fate! I knew somethin' was goin' to happen!"

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Overplayed Hands

By Ira Mullinax

SWIFTLY as a leaping coyote, Shep Coleman sprang for his gun on the bunkhouse wall. With one long bound, an eyeflash quicker, Mark Williams landed in front of him, shot a fist to Shep's jaw and crashed him to the floor.

With the near approach of breakfast both had hung up their guns, but the fighting words Mark had just roared out fired Shep with murderous rage. Now he lay dazed and gunless, snarling. Mark made no motion toward his own weapon, he was entirely willing to settle it with fists.

There was none of the quitter in Shep. He struggled to his feet, rushed like a charging bull. His flinty knuckles peeled a square of tan off Mark's cheek, drummed like hammers on his ribs. Mark hunched his broad shoulders, lunged forward with six feet of range toughened muscle. His fist shot out with all his weight behind it.

Shep's chin was just high enough to catch the full force of that terrific swing. He reeled back, thudded down on the floor like a sack of bran. Twisting and cursing, he lay there unable to rise.

As Mark stood over him with doubled fists, the door scraped open, bootheels clumped across the sill. Mark whirled, faced a stockily built, black-haired man.

"What's all the row about?" he demanded, with a hostile glare out of keen gray eyes.

From under dark lashes Mark's brown ones shot back a defiant glance. "Jest a little private affair," his wide mouth snapped. "We can settle it without any outside help."

Shep sat up slowly, rubbing his battered chin. "This Montana kid wouldn't be alive if I'd a had my gun on. He accused me of rustlin', wagon rustlin', at that."

"A mighty serious charge, unless you've got plenty proof," growled the stranger.

Mark rolled a cigarette while he looked him over. He wore a wide leather belt, costly russet riding boots, doeskin breeches. His shirt of red and green stripes was silk. An expensive, fuzzy brown sombrero plainly indicated a person of importance.

"I'm Ed Gilbert, cashier of the Brandsville Bank," he drawled with an air of "look who I am." "Just out inspectin' the Circle A an' other ranches we've got loans on. If cattle are bein' stole, it's to our interest to know about it."

"A wagon rustler's been at work," Mark willingly explained. "One o' them small scale sneaks that kills a cow here an' there, hauls off the meat an' sells it. This mornin' I found the leavin's of a butcherin' out on the range, the sixth one in three weeks. Hoofprints beside the wheeltracks showed they was two that done it, an'—"

"You jumped at the conclusion Shep was one," Gilbert sneered.

"His bunk was empty last night," Mark retorted hotly. "When I rode out to look at some calves, I found a cow's head an' other fresh leavin's. Shep was here when I got back. Bloody water in the pan where he washed, blood stains on his chaps. How come, if he didn't help that rustler butcher another Circle A cow?"

"That's my business," snarled Shep, scrambling to his feet.

"An' it's mine to keep watch on any outfit's cattle I ride the range for," Mark growled and stuck his square chin out. "Yo're lucky I didn't ketch you helpin' carve up that cow."

"Fer a stranger in this country, yo're almighty fresh," Gilbert cut in, his tanned face flushing. "Beatin' up an innocent puncher on mere suspicion, you shore have stuck yore foot in trouble. Shep's a friend of mine, you'll have to prove what you've been poppin' off."

Mark went hot all over. With one big, swift hand he jerked his gun from the wall, with the other he snatched down Shep's belt with its holstered forty-five. He thrust them out towards Shep, grasping his own gun with ready fingers.

"Git outa this shack, both of you—now!" he roared. "An' lissen, Shep. I want them five iron men I loaned you last week."

"If you'll meet me in front of the Brandsville Bank tomorrow afternoon, I'll see yo're paid." With that Shep followed Gilbert in a hurried exit.

"Don't worry," Gilbert barked back over his shoulder. "Shep's my friend. I'll see to it you git all that you've got comin'."

Through the dusty window Mark watched Shep lead his black bronco out of the shed by the corral; saw him gallop off beside the banker on his sleek brown, gaited mare.

"If that Gilbert ain't as big a crook as Shep, then horns don't grow on cows," he muttered.

Curses and threats came mumbling through Shep's swollen lips as he rode along beside the banker.

"That sneakin' Montana rat ain't heard the last o' this!"

Gilbert's long, canine teeth glistened in a grin, his black eyes gleamed with cunning.

"He'll shore hear a plenty before we git through with him," he growled. "No outsider can horn in an' start trouble fer our Texas boys, not an' git away with it."

Mark stood looking after them as the two cantered off across the prairie. He picked up his other forty-five from under the pillow on his bunk, and buckled it with its mate around him.

"Looks like I've started this day by makin' me a pair of lively enemies," he mumbled. "Oh, well!" And he patted the guns in their holsters, two friends that never had failed him.

RAIN was beating the prairie grass flat as Mark galloped across the Circle A towards Brandsville the following afternoon. Water streamed down his yellow slicker, filmed his face till it shone like polished bronze.

"Shep shore picked out nice weather fer his pay off," he grinned. "Well, I'm used to all the weather ever was er ever will be. I've never seen this Brandsville town, an' now I've got a good excuse fer takin' my first day off."

He thought about Shep as he rode along. Dark and shaggy haired, Shep had a long, doglike nose between two shifty, ice colored eyes. A chronic moocher of cigarette makings and small loans off the easy going, free handed waddies, he seldom made good on his promises to repay.

"Soon as Shep's paid off, he hightails it to Brandsville," Mark reflected. "Roulette er stud poker busts him, back to the

ranch he lopes an' starts borryin' agin. Purty quick after that we allus find where this wagon rustler's been at work, an' right away Shep is flush agin, till the gamblers clean him out."

It was strange, too, that Shep's bunk was so often empty at night. And, if he knew nothing of the rustling, why hadn't he explained about the blood on his chaps?

"Rangeland is full o' strange things an' queer hombres," Mark summed up.

He had had excellent opportunities to know. Early that spring he had started out from his native Montana for a look at the limitless cow country. Leisurely he had traveled south, working on ranches along the way. Now mid-summer found him here in the Texas Panhandle, riding after critters for the Circle A outfit.

Brandsville, towards which he now was headed, was built where one old cattle trail crossed another. Twenty little sand-whipped houses, half a dozen frame business buildings and, on a corner, the single two-story brick which contained the bank, that was the old cow town of Brandsville.

Late that afternoon Mark galloped up the trail, which became a street where it ran between the buildings.

"Here's where I git my money," he laughed, glancing across the muddy thoroughfare. "Afternoon's nearly gone. Shep'll have to rustle around before the bank locks up."

Mark stopped in front of the Travelers' Lunch Room, left his mare at the rack and waded through the reddish mud across the street, deserted now because of the heavy downpour. In front of the bank sagged a dull red wooden awning supported by posts half whittled in two by idling punchers' jack knives. It made a snug, dry place to roll a cigarette and wait for Shep. Mark reached under his slicker for the makin's.

"Wham! spat!" From behind him came a roar, a bullet smashed against the wall in front. He spun around on one heel, jammed the tobacco sack back in its place. He glanced up and down the gray, rain-beaten street. Not a soul was in sight.

But across there, just opposite where he stood, a thin cloud of smoke lifted lazily through the open window of a pool hall. As he whirled, hot lead began to sing from the window, swifter than the raindrops. A bullet tore through the brim of his hat, another hummed an inch from his ear.

"Dry gulched, right in town, too!" he snapped. He yanked a forty-five from under his slicker, ready to give back shot for shot.

In his shining yellow slicker, Mark seemed an easy target, yet his flesh remained untouched.

"Poor shootin'," he sniffed. He jerked up his gun and sent a shower of slugs zinging through the window. For a moment the firing ceased.

Mark drew his second gun. Bullets suddenly began to whine close again, he thrust the weapon back into its leather. To stand there in the open, a target for a hidden gunman, would soon mean certain death. Whoever it was, he just couldn't keep on missing.

"He that fights an' lopes away, will live to scrap some other day," Mark hummed to himself, then muttered grimly, "This is too blame much like suicide. I'll finish this fight when it is a fight, out in the open, with an even chance."

He zig-zagged through the slush like a streak of yellow fireworks to his mare. Men had run into the street now, and were pumping hot lead after him. He vaulted into the saddle, seized the bridle reins.

A BULLET cut one off, close to the shining bit, left the end flapping in his grasp. The pull of his hand on the other rein turned the mare suddenly around, almost threw him in the mud. He grabbed the saddlehorn, and with the one remaining rein, guided the mare into the trail. He gave her the spurs and let her have her head.

Bullets whined past his ears, knocked up little jets of water like tiny geysers in puddles far ahead. But the street was short, his mare was swift. In a few quick leaps she had turned the corner, in a moment had carried her rider beyond the range of spitting guns.

"Shep Coleman's way of gittin' even," Mark growled. Yet back of it must be something more than mere revenge.

"Supposin' he told he caught me helpin' out that wagon rustler; that I chased him off; made threats to git him. Him an' his pals could easy claim I come to town gunnin' fer Shep. That would shift all the blame on me; put him in good with the cowmen."

Mark's brown eyes blazed as he figured the possibilities. His jaw snapped tight.

"State Bankers' Association has hung up $5,000 reward fer *dead* bandits. There was me, a plumb stranger in town, right at the bank door with two forty-fives strapped on! Easy way to make five thousand, cuttin' me down as a bandit! Duck soup for Shep to pull that, git square an' shut my trap fer good, all three at once."

Mark kept turning it over as he rode along.

"Shore, that's the dope," he finally concluded. "That bandit stuff—an' me an ole Montana sheriff's son!"

Hard riding soon brought him to the edge of the hills with their concealing timber. The rain had slackened now and left the trail a twisted stretch of sticky clay, but his mare was the kind that eats up distance as well in mud as on dry ground.

At the top of the hill he stopped to give her a breathing spell. From where he sat he could see clear back to town. He expected to see a band of horsemen riding hot upon his trail. But there wasn't a soul in sight.

"Strange," he considered, "after all the shootin'. But that five thousand reward will put plenty hombres in the saddle soon enough. They'll come a-ridin' hard, an' they won't fergit to bring a rope."

They wouldn't need that, he reflected an instant later. He would swap lead with them to the last, go down with both his six-guns hot and pumping.

Heavy clouds hung so low he felt he could almost touch them. Soon the hills would be dark as only a rainy night could make them. Mark rode on into the woods, gained a higher eminence, and sat with his hands on the saddlehorn, thinking.

The way the land lay, he had only to ride back to where he had entered the woods, slip down the trail and strike the river. It was barely a mile away and easily forded, now. But by morning this downpour would make it a wide, swift torrent no horseman would dare attempt crossing. On the other side lay safety.

"A fine jam I've worked myself into," he snarled at himself. "All because some rustler stole a cow that didn't even belong to me."

But that was the cowboy code, he reflected. Guarding his boss's cattle, fighting his battles, dying for any old outfit he hooked up with. A loyalty that has laid many a poor puncher in an unmarked prairie grave.

Officers and cowmen, grim, fearless riders who sought his death would soon be tracking him. He glanced about at the woods, with its countless places of concealment, the trail that led to safety beyond the river.

"No!" His voice was a snarl of scorn and anger. "Brain work and nerve, not leg work, has got to git me outa this. An' if it comes to gun work—well, I've got me two good Colts!"

He turned his mare down the slope, and with set teeth headed straight for the Circle A Ranch.

WET and cold and hungry, Mark rode over the hills and across the Bear Creek bottom. His mare went along at the brisk eager gait a horse always strikes when it knows it is going home. But at that it was after midnight when he reached the place.

The bunkhouse was dark as the bottom of a well. Were the punchers in there beneath their blankets, Mark wondered, or riding on his trail with rope and gun? Anyhow, they wouldn't try to cut him down with no chance or warning like the hidden gunman over in Brandsville. That was not in their unwritten code. And here was the last place pursuers would expect to find him.

He slipped up to the bunkhouse, quietly pushed the door open and lit a match. He stood back by the sheltering wall, thrust his arm through the opening, with the match held high. By its fluttering light he saw all the six bunks were empty.

"Shep's had plenty time to git word here from town," he muttered, "so the boys must be ridin' on my trail. Well, pards, yo're gonta be disapp'inted."

He hurried back to the fence for his mare, swiftly figuring things over as he led her toward the corral.

"Fine night fer them ole wagon rustlers to work, with the rain, the excitement and all. Here's where I prove I pack no long rope on my saddle, if they's any suspicion of that. An' show 'em I'm no bank bandit either."

Under a shed stood an empty old chuck wagon, in the barn dozed a span of harness-broke bronks. He hurriedly buckled the harness on them, led them out and hitched them to the wagon.

"Shore hate to leave you, Lady," he mumbled as he stroked the mare's neck

and turned her into the corral. "But in case of sumpin sudden, I can cut one of these bronks loose an' fork him. With no saddle he'd cover ground quicker."

For rustlers the slickest meeting place in the country was the old log shack over in a bend of the creek. The loneliest spot on the ranch, it was miles off any trail. All around it was rocky soil with grass so thin even the cattle shunned it.

"Nice quiet nook fer a bandit's hideout, too," thought Mark as he drove along.

It was fully six miles to the place. In the mud and wet grass the wagon could not be heard far, as on a clear, frosty night. Yet, a quarter of a mile from the hut, he stopped and tied the team to a sapling. Horses might neigh at each other, a dozen things happen to rouse a wary, desperate man behind those gray cabin walls.

"Handful o' gravel ag'in' the winder'll bring him out," Mark calculated, "when I'm all set an' ready. Then—"

Once the fellow stepped out the door, the rest should be a cinch. The jab of a forty-five against his belly, a quickly wound rope, and he would be a prisoner.

"That," said Mark to himself, "is where this ole cart will come in handy. Handlin' extry ridin' horses in the dark with a desperate man on one is plumb unhandy. Risky, too, 'cause he might use his spurs an' git clean away."

A grim thought flashed into his brain. "Then, agin, sumpin' might happen so a hombre jest couldn't ride on leather."

Mark did a little more quick figuring. What if there were two or more inside the cabin? Suppose they all rushed out?

"That'll mean plenty shootin' in the dark," he muttered sternly, "with my chances jest as good as theirs."

Mark crept up close to the cabin. The glass in the window glowed dully like four squares of thin, dirty brass.

"Shore enough, somebody's in there!"

Anything might happen any minute, now. He stood tense as a listening panther, then cautiously moved forward a few steps.

The rain had slackened again, the wide, vast prairie lay silent. Mark felt as if the whole world could hear the sucking of his boots as at each laborious step he pulled them from the mud.

Through the dirty grain sacks hung over it, the light made the window no more than a shadowy square. Mark stooped for a handful of gravel to throw against the panes.

"Bong!" The cabin walls muffled a shot. Mark straightened up, listening for groans or other sounds. With more than two inside the place, excited voices must follow. But, after the shot, the silence seemed deeper than ever. In a few seconds more the light went out.

"Somebody shore plugged whoever else is in there!"

That would leave him only one to deal with. The survivor would not remain long in that dark hole beside the body of his victim. He would be making his get-away pronto.

"I'll see if I'm right," Mark determined.

Swift, silent steps carried him to a place beside the door. In a moment it opened and out stepped a man, breathing deeply as if intensely excited. Mark thrust his gun against the flapping slicker, his voice a low growl.

"Better stick 'em up!" he advised.

Off his arm a rope uncoiled, its ready loop dropped over the upthrust hands. A few quick twists and turns, a final knot, and the fellow was bound like a hog-tied calf. An instant's fumbling in the dark, and off came belt and guns. A push sent the captive prone upon the muddy ground.

"Who are ye, podner?" Mark demanded.

THE fellow lay silent, stubbornly refusing to utter a hint as to his identity. Lighting a match to look was risky. Inside the cabin might lie a wounded, desperate gunman who would send a bullet whizzing at the flame.

Mark bent down and ran his hand over the fallen man's face.

"It ain't Shep Coleman, anyhow," he told himself. "His nose ain't long an' sharp enough."

From the cabin roof came the steady drip-drip of rain. Mark stood beside the open door, holding his breath as he listened.

Presently a faint groan quavered through the darkness. Gun in hand, Mark edged across the door sill and flattened himself against the wall. In a moment came another groan, and the sound of someone moving, as if writhing in mortal pain. A body turned heavily, rolled squarely against his feet and lay motionless.

Mark struck a match and looked down. Before him lay a tall, long legged man

stretched out on his face. A dark wet spot spread an ugly, irregular stain in the back of his blue checked shirt. He gasped and twisted, struggling back to consciousness.

By the light of another match Mark found a rusty lantern, raised the still warm globe and lit it. He turned the man over, snatched a blanket from a wall bunk and put it beneath the man's head. In an old tin can he caught cool water from the dripping eaves, poured a little between the hot lips and bathed the pale face.

In a minute the man opened his eyes and looked up.

"Yo're the sheriff, I reckon," he moaned feebly.

"No, I'm Mark Williams, puncher fer the Circle A."

At this the fellow brightened, seemed suddenly to gain strength.

"Oh! The Montana kid that licked Shep. Too bad you didn't kill the low-down, double-crossin'—"

The rest was choked back by a blob of bloody foam. Mark bathed the red stained face and again held water to the quivering lips. He cut away the sticky shirt, took a look at the wound.

"Yo're hit plumb bad," he said solemnly. "That slug drove clean through an' out yore breast. If you've got any word you want to leave, you better be spillin' it now."

In spite of this, desperate hope and determination mingled with the look of pain on the broad, tanned face. The fellow raised himself on one elbow, began to speak excitedly.

"Jesse James got shot through the lungs," he wheezed, "an' he lived to ride fer years after. So I've got a chance, if you'll only git me to a doctor. If you will, I'll tell you sumpin that might save yore neck."

"What makes you think my neck's in danger?"

"It's been spread around you was the real Circle A rustler, accusin' Shep to hide yore tracks."

"I figgered Shep'd spring that ole trick to cover up his own hoofprints," Mark growled.

"It worked," the wounded man whispered. "Most everybody on the range believes Shep's lie."

Mark pondered this a moment soberly.

"Then if I started out takin' you to a doctor," he said, "an' we bumped into a bunch of rustler hunters, you'd be in mighty bad company. I can shoot my way out, but they'd string you up pronto on the nearest jack oak."

"They won't touch an hombre that looks so close to passin' in his checks as me. Besides, they'll be anxious to hear what I know. An' it's plenty to square things fer both of us."

"Spill me a sample—an' hurry!"

"Run a butcher shop over at Hoofton," the wounded man wheezed. "Go by the name of Jim Scott. You got the goods on Shep, all right. With his help rustlin' cattle, I got beef fer my shop mighty cheap. After you licked him, he was redhot to git even—"

His voice died away in a spasm of pain. Mark rubbed his cold hands, and after a moment, asked him, "How come yo're so sore agin Shep, seein' you two are rustlin' pals?"

"Because we was pals I trusted him. An' so, when—"

Hatred flared in the prostrate man's eyes, he struggled to continue, but the effort was too great. He sank back on the floor, unconscious.

Mark bathed Scott's face again, stood up thinking swiftly.

"I'll git him to a doctor," he decided. "He might git patched up an' pull through. An' I shore hanker to know what he started to tell."

HE hung the lantern on a nail and strode out. A rapid dogtrot across the wet grass soon brought him to the wagon. He leaped upon the seat, urged the bronks into a lope.

"I shore figgered right in bringin' this ole cart," he muttered as the wagon lurched across the rocks. He stopped the panting team a few yards in front of the cabin.

The lantern had burned itself out, Mark's last match was gone, he found none on either Scott or the hog-tied man. When he re-entered the door, Scott had regained consciousness, started babbling again.

"Keep quiet," Mark ordered. "You'll have plenty chance to talk. I'm takin' you to a doctor, better save all yore strength till he patches you up."

Gently as if he were an injured child, Mark picked him up and laid him on a blanket in the wagon. He wheeled and turned back for the hog-tied man.

"Who are you, anyhow?" he barked, as

he turned the fellow over with the toe of his boot.

A mumbled oath was the only answer. Mark seized him by the collar, dragged him across the muddy ground and dumped him in beside Scott. From under the wagon seat he took the canvas cover, spread it over them to keep off the rain.

He turned back to look for their horses, soon found them in a tangle of brush. He took off the bridles, hung them on the saddlehorns and slapped the two bronks on the rump. They snorted and trotted away. Mark knew they would go straight home.

The guns he had taken off Scott and the stranger he placed in the front of the wagon, within easy reach. Then he climbed to the seat, grasped the lines, and the wagon rumbled away through the tall prairie grass.

Dark as it was, he urged the bronks forward in a swinging gallop. Scott's life, perhaps his own, depended on quick action. Presently he reached an old abandoned trail which led to the main traveled route. Mark whipped up the bronks and headed down it straight for Brandsville!

Scott began chattering again, his voice high and shrill above the clatter of the wagon, cursing and accusing the hog-tied man beside him. Mark listened with amazement at the tale of murderous cunning Scott unfolded.

MARK kept the team going at a rapid clip which steadily ate up the miles. The trail suddenly narrowed to pass between two high cut banks. As the wagon rumbled through it, Mark glimpsed two mounted figures in the gloom. From each side they dashed toward him.

He pulled the knotted lines over his shoulders, his hands swooped down to his holsters.

"Put 'em up!" came a yell from the right.

Mark recognized the voice of Jerry Bass, a Circle A bronk peeler. He steadied himself in the seat, made no answer.

"Wham!" came a shot from the silent rider on the left. The bullet zinged an inch from Mark's eyes, set them watering from its heat. He blinked and dabbed them with his handkerchief.

"Ping!" A slug from the left notched his hatbrim.

Instantly Mark's guns were out, whanged empty with incredible swiftness. He dropped them and grabbed Scott's two Colts from the bottom of the wagon.

Pressing back on the lines with his shoulders to steady the two plunging bronks, he sent streams of hot lead left and right at the bright red lances stabbing through the dark. A squeal of anguish, the clump of a heavy body on the grass told him a horse had gone down, left the silent gunman dismounted.

The bronks were racing their swiftest now, the wheels flinging up water and mud as the wagon jounced madly down the trail. Jerry Bass galloped up, cut around from the rear, his forty-five streaking scarlet threads through the curtain of black.

Mark snatched for the guns he had taken off the hog-tied stranger. As he straightened up his right hand gripped the bone handle, the gun spit a luminous blob over the dashboard.

"Ow! My leg, my leg!" came a yell.

Something dropped like a sack of cement in the mud. Mark heard a dragging sound, cries of "Whoa!" and he knew Jerry's foot was caught in the stirrup.

"Jest too bad," he mumbled grimly. "But maybe his pal will untangle him."

At top speed the bronks dashed on, then suddenly slowed up. Mark knew from the hoof sounds the "off" horse was limping.

He set the brake, leaped out and felt its legs over. Down its right front leg ran a warm, sticky stream. Mark felt higher, touched a ragged hole in the flesh where one of Jerry's bullets had tunneled through. Tenderly he patted the big bronk's neck.

"I shore hate this, old boy," he said. "But I know you'll keep goin' till we git where I can fix you up."

"Fer the Lord's sake hurry up an' git me to a doctor!" wailed Scott from inside the wagon.

Mark made no answer. Grim and silent, he climbed back on the seat, clucked to the team. He let them take their own gait. In agony the wounded horse limped along, holding back his mate. They moved with exasperating slowness, but always forward, forward towards Brandsville.

"We'll git there, all hunky," Mark muttered confidently. "I've knowed bronks to come miles fer water, with wire cuts lots worse than that bullet hole."

Under the canvas behind him, Scott began babbling again. Mark gripped the lines and rasped between set teeth: "Hope to glory he lives to tell his little tale."

THROUGH broken, gray clouds, the first dawn light was spreading when Mark reached the outskirts of Brandsville. At its edge he leaped out of the wagon, ran across to a small red barn, dashed back and drove on. At the corner where the main streets crossed, he turned and headed down an alley behind the bank.

A light shone through the transom. Mark ran up and knocked. A lock turned, the door opened a crack, a forty-five scowled through inquiringly. Peering out over it stood John Estes, white haired and grizzled, an oldtime cowman turned banker. His voice was a suspicious growl.

"Who are you? An' what you want at a bank's back door this time o' day?"

"I'm Mark Williams from the Circle A. Been movin' purty lively since that shootin' yisterday. I got sumpin to tell ye an' show ye—sumpin powerful interestin'."

Estes knew an honest cowboy face when he saw one. A glance into Mark's steady brown eyes and he holstered his forty-five, swung the door wide.

"Come in," he invited, leading the way to his private office back of the vault. "I've been here all night checkin' things over," he added drowsily. "So hurry an' git that load offa yore mind."

Mark talked rapidly, Estes listening pop-eyed. Mark had almost finished his story when the front door boomed with a loud, impatient knock. The banker hurried out to answer it.

"Come in, Shep," he exclaimed. "What's the latest?"

Shep replied jerkily, in a voice high and tense with excitement.

"Jest brought Jerry Bass in. We had an awful gunfight with that Montana kid. He plugged Jerry in the leg, shot my horse smack out from under me, so we both rode in on Jerry's. Mark stole a Circle A team an' wagon to make his git-away an'—"

"Durn funny," Estes interrupted, "when good swift saddle bronks are plenty on the ranch. A wagon is mighty slow goin', specially when the law is ridin' on yore trail."

"Yeh, it does look crazy. Mark cain't be far away. Soon as I can find Ed Gilbert, we'll lope out an' bring him in."

"Come on back," said Estes. "I want you to see an' hear sumpin mighty interestin'."

At the office door he stepped back for Shep to enter. Shep got one look, tried to whirl and dodge behind Estes just as Mark leaped forward. With one hand he seized Shep's belt, with the other poked a gun against his belly.

"Stick 'em up, you crooked hound!"

"Go on in," ordered Estes, as the astonished Shep flung up his hands. He stepped through the doorway, stood against the wall while the banker dropped into a chair. In a moment Shep regained his self-possession.

"Rode in to rob the bank," he sneered. "Lost yore nerve an' hit the trail when lead begun to sting. Left yore sidekick to do the stickup singlehanded later."

"You an' Gilbert framed it to look that way. They's a $5,000 reward fer *dead* bank robbers. You an' him lost a lotta money when yore crooked schemes went sour."

"Bunk!" rasped Shep. "Who'll believe a bandit ag'in' a bank cashier like Gilbert?"

"They don't have to take a bandit's word. I've got plenty proof."

"So you sneaked in to square yoreself," snarled Shep, "throw a bluff to save yore neck."

"Shore cuts a figger, squarin' myself," Mark declared. "Specially by showin' up a pair of crooks an' murder plotters."

Shep wrung his elevated hands, screwed up his face and turned a pleading look at Estes.

"Have him put up his gun," he begged, "an' let me go find Ed. When we bring in Mark's pal, toes up, that'll prove who's on the square."

"If yo're so keen to find Ed Gilbert," roared Mark, "he's out there in the alley—with yore other pal, Jim Scott!"

He reached out and plucked Shep's Colts from their holsters.

"Come on!" he growled.

With Mark's gun prodding Shep, the three strode out in the alley to the wagon. Estes pulled back the canvas and peered in.

"It's them, shore as shootin'!" he exclaimed.

At the sight Shep's face went white as lime.

"A doctor," moaned Scott; "hurry an' git me a doctor!"

"Soon as you repeat what you told me," said Mark. "It won't take long."

"Gilbert," Scott began with a groan, "he got wise to Shep's rustlin', used it to make a tool of him. When Mark got next to it

an' smacked him down, Shep was hot to git square an' silence a witness, both at once. It was then Ed schemed to frame Mark as a bandit."

A SPELL of coughing shook him, but soon he forced himself to continue.

"Ed seen my pictur' at the sheriff's office, learned I was wanted fer a stick-up in Wyoming. So he sends word by Shep I must lope over here, hold up the bank durin' the excitement after they had knocked off Mark. That made the job plumb easy. It was do as Ed said, er back to Wyoming an' life in the pen. It all went like Ed had planned, except they failed to bump off Mark."

"The lousiest two shots in Texas," grinned Mark. "Well, after you stuck up the bank, then what?"

"Gilbert was to git half the loot fer his brain work, Shep an' me divide the rest. I hit it up fer the Circle A's ole cabin to meet Shep an' make the divvy."

Scott's voice now rose to a fury of anger and hatred.

"But when I gits to the cabin an' lights a lantern, Gilbert pops out from behind the stove! Shep, the double-crossin' hound, had tipped him off to where I was. Gilbert plugs me in the back an' grabs the dough."

"Five thousand reward fer a dead bank bandit, too," drawled Mark. "But Gilbert shot too high."

"With me knocked stiff, only them two would have the lowdown on the robbery. Then they'd shoot down Mark as a bandit, an' nobody else would know about the rustlin'."

"An' they'd git five thousand more fer me," growled Mark. "Then Gilbert, to make himself plumb safe, has only one more thing to do, see that Shep gits in the way of a bullet."

"Yeh," Scott agreed with a moan, "so he could grab all the bank loot an' both rewards himself."

"All a pack of lies!" roared Gilbert. "Nobody'll believe a word of it ag'in' a man of my standing."

"Plenty proof!" exclaimed Mark. "Git an eyeful o' this!"

From under his slicker he jerked a blood-stained canvas money bag. Out of it he drew sheaves of bills fastened with paper bands bearing the name of the bank.

"Got this offa you at the cabin, Gilbert. It fits in to a dot with everything Scott says."

Estes took the money, quickly counted it.

"Four thousand dollars," he said.

"An' they's four thousand more, Gilbert's share," rasped Scott. "I hid it under the manger of his barn as I agreed to, when I doubled back through town on my way to the cabin."

"I stopped at the barn for a look," said Mark. "It was there, jest like you said. I brought it along, here it is."

He pulled out another canvas money-bag stuffed with bills.

"Four thousand's right," announced Estes after a hurried count. "Eight thousand in all, exactly what the bandit took. Everything gees completely with everything Scott says."

"Double-crossin' makes a feller sore," said Mark, "so he tells a lotta truth to git even."

"The only one that played square with his pals," Estes added, "Scott's evidence will carry weight."

CORNERED, Gilbert now whined out an abject confession.

He had stolen the bank's funds to speculate in pedigreed cattle, he admitted. A big drop in prices, with heavy loeses from mold poisoned feed, left him facing ruin.

"I figgered the insurance would cover the robbery loss," he quavered. "Then I would slip back my part of the swag, along with the reward for Mark, to cover up what I had done."

But this wasn't nearly enough, he explained, so he planned to murder Scott for an additional five thousand, and steal his pals' share of the loot.

Shep cast a glance of hatred at Scott, whose evidence would place him and his banker pal behind steel bars. His voice was a whine of terror.

"It was Scott done the actual robbin'. If you an' me turn state's evidence, Ed, maybe they won't be so hard on us two."

"You double-crossin' coyote," snarled Scott.

Gilbert made no reply to Shep. Thinking only of his own skin as black fear gripped him, his tone was a cowardly wail.

"They'll hang me, they'll hang me! Ain't there any way to square this?"

"Gilbert," said Estes solemnly, "you've always prated loud about law enforcement.

Here's where you get a taste of it. And that goes for Shep Coleman, too."

Then he turned and grasped Mark's hand.

"Cowboy, you shore done a grand piece of work. Hope you'll stick here in the Panhandle. If you want to buy a ranch and cattle, I'm sure the bank will fix it for you."

Never had Mark smiled more broadly.

"A cow puncher's dream come true! Much obliged, Mr. Estes, that's a deal."

"Okay. I'll stand guard over Shep while you run git Scott a doctor."

As Mark started off he shot a parting glance of triumph back at Shep and Gilbert.

"Looks to me," he grinned, "like you two schemers plumb overplayed yore hands."

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Hell on Wheels

By Ray Porter

TARP OLINGER and Brindle Barclay walked into the Highlow saloon. They were thirsty, but broke.

They leaned against the bar. The bartender, a heavy, sullen man, moved near them. He waited for their order, saying nothing.

"What would you *like* to have, Tarp?" Brindle asked, gazing wistfully toward the front of the saloon, with its tempting display of bottles, all sizes and potency.

Brindle had vacant blue eyes, and a long, thin neck. He had not noticed the waiting bartender.

"I'd be satisfied with a schooner of beer," Tarp grunted. Beak-nosed and gruff, he looked down the bar at two ranchers lolling above two foaming mugs. If he had seen the bartender, he paid no attention.

The bartender, taking too much for granted perhaps, moved away and came back in a moment, sliding two foamers at Brindle and Tarp. These two roustabouts from the Cross-Up ranch had come into the saloon to ask permission to fill their canteens with water, in preparation for the long ride back to the ranch.

Brindle looked at the beer. His mouth dropped open in surprise. Tarp grunted, and licked his lips. They glanced at each other covertly.

Tarp put his hand out toward the glass, tapping his fingers on the bar reflectively. Brindle hooked a boot over the rail. Both reached for their glasses. For a glorious instant their noses were buried in the tall glass mugs.

Each solemnly wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve.

"Now what would you *like* to have, Tarp?" Brindle inquired blandly.

"I'd *like* to have another one just like that," Tarp said, feelingly.

"So would I," Brindle agreed.

A moment later two more mugs slid their way. For fifteen minutes they stood there, expressing their wishes to each other, and having them promptly fulfilled. The more they got, the more they wanted. But there was nothing too much for them to ask. The world was theirs, all bottled up for them. And there was a generous old gent pulling the corks.

"Now, wha-szhu like to have, Tarp?" Brindle asked for the seventh time.

Tarp straightened, focused his black, deeply set eyes on the gently revolving bartender. "I'd like to have some dinero to pay for them drinks," he said, softly.

"So would I," Brindle echoed.

Each felt through his pockets, in methodical, but unsteady fashion.

"Tha's funny," Brindle commented.

"Shore is," Tarp agreed.

"We been standin' here wishin' for things, and gettin' 'em. Tha's the first thing we've wished for in thirty minutes that we didn't get pronto."

The bartender's scowl was deepening. He began tapping on the bar, suggestively.

"Oh, well," Brindle said, philosophically. "All things gotta end sometime."

"Tha's right," said Tarp. "We might as well be goin'."

"That'll be two dollars and six bits," said the bartender.

Brindle had started for the door. He turned in surprise.

"Wha' say?" he asked.

"I said two dollars and six bits," the bartender repeated.

"Oh." He stared vacantly at the chunky, aproned figure. He looked at Tarp. "Wha's he talkin' about, Tarp?"

"We didn't order a thing," Tarp explained, with a gentle hiccough. "You don't expect us to pay for somethin' we didn't order, do you?"

"Me and Tarp was just sayin' what we'd *like* to have, if we had the money to pay for it with," Brindle added. "Didn't you ever wish for things, that a-way, Heavy? It's a lot of fun."

"We got money, out at the Cross-Up," Tarp went on, deciding that the bartender had a defective sense of humor. "Cal took it away from us before we started to town. We'll pay you next time we come in."

"He was afraid we'd get drunk," Brindle said, in a hurt tone of voice. He weaved toward the door. Tarp followed, less unsteadily.

"Kurk!" said the bartender, sharply.

A HUGE man, with a flat, scarred face, came from the back of the saloon. The bartender nodded toward the retreating cowhands. The bouncer overtook them before they got to the door.

"Just a minute, gents," said, laying a hand on Tarp's shoulder. "Fork up."

"Can't fork up," said Tarp.

"Ain't got no fork," Brindle added, giggling.

"Can't load salt with a fork," said Tarp. "We come to town for a load of salt."

"For guys that ain't got no pitch-fork, you seem to be scatterin' around purty well," said the bouncer. He leered into Tarp's face, and tightened his grip. "Two dollars and six bits," he growled, "or I'll take it out of your hide."

"But you can't do that," said Tarp, decidedly.

"No?"

"No. I'm inside of it."

Brindle chimed in, happily. "Yeh, he's inside of it."

"I'll change all that," said the bouncer.

He started in with the evident intention of turning Tarp's hide wrong side out, to see what was inside of it. Tarp was just drunk enough to take a lot of mauling around without feeling it much. He took a lot. Then he began to feel it. This irritated him. Tarp, drunk and irritated, was hard to turn wrong side out. He let loose a flock of fists and feet. Then he and the bouncer got down on the floor and kicked each other in the face.

But the most fascinating pastimes get monotonous. Tarp got up, ready to call it a day. The bouncer stayed where he was.

Tarp looked about until he located the bartender. "We'll pay you that two dollars and six bits the next time we come to town," he said.

Tarp and Brindle got back to their wagon, loaded with salt, and started out of town. From the depot, they had to pull a steep hill, for the town of Highlow was built on the sides of a gulch, the main part near the bottom and the houses perched along the higher ground where a level

space large enough for a foundation could be prepared. It was an old mining town, and the surrounding hills were tunneled and gutted.

Half way up the incline, the wagon came to a halt to give the mules a blow. Tarp, looking back, growled, "Here comes Pot-bellied Pete, wavin' his gun."

Pete Ruckton was the sheriff.

Brindle looked back. His dreamy eyes half-closed. "It would be too bad if this rope was to come loose right now, wouldn't it?" he mused.

The salt, in fifty-pound cakes, was loaded on a flat-bed wagon, with removable sides. A rope was drawn across the top of the load, binding it, and holding the top layer, which was above the end-gate.

"Accidents will happen," Tarp said, gruffly.

A moment later the rope was free. Brindle shoved gently. The top part of the load started sliding. Several cakes of salt bounded down the hill.

The sheriff tried to dodge the avalanche, succeeding fairly well. Brindle shoved at the next layer of cakes. The end-gate gave way.

The entire load went out, taking Brindle with it. The mules, released suddenly from the weight against their shoulders, made a short spurt ahead.

Brindle went down the hill in a shower of salt boulders, coming to rest at a twist in the road which had proved the sheriff's haven. The official was standing nearby.

"It *will* work," said Brindle.

The sheriff approached, suspiciously. "What are you talkin' about, you nit-wit? Out of your head?"

"No. It'll work, I tell you."

"What'll work?"

"I've heard about catchin' rabbits by puttin' salt on their tails, and I always figgered there wasn't nothin' to it." Brindle rolled over, dislodging a cake of salt from his back. "But it'll work. You can catch anything, if you use enough salt."

THE sheriff grunted. He looked up the hill. The wagon had reached the top and was going out of sight.

"I'll get him," the officer said. Then to Brindle, "Get up from there. I'll lock you up first."

He escorted his prisoner down the hill, across the bottom of the gulch, and a short distance up the opposite slope. A brick courthouse had been built at this spot, when the town was young and had a solid footing under it. The undermining had made brick buildings unsafe. The hollowed hills shivered once in a while, in miniature earthquake fashion. So the courthouse, tallest building in town — being two stories—was being torn down, and in its place a frame structure erected.

The jail had been dismantled. The sheriff had removed all his prisoners to an adjoining county. The two iron cells, or "tanks," he had set to one side.

He guided Brindle to one of the cells, unlocked it, and shoved his prisoner inside.

Brindle looked about him in consternation. The cell was about eight feet square, and entirely barren. It was solid metal on all sides, except the front, which was made of bars.

"Locked in a cage like a gone-damned badger," he muttered, as the sheriff moved away. "What will Cal say?"

Cal Triggerton, quiet little boss of the Cross-Up, had a way of saying things that made a man wish he never had been born, especially a man who had been sent to town on an important job and had got drunk and thrown into the hoose-gow, instead. Cross-Up cattle needed salt, bad. For one thing, they were not shedding properly. It was late in spring, and they looked mighty ragged. A buyer was due soon.

There had been a strike in the coal mines. Triggerton had managed to get a car through. He had sent Tarp and Brindle to town for the first load, after making sure they had no funds to get them sidetracked. For there had been previous painful experiences.

Early darkness settled in the gulch. There was no light in Brindle's cell, but the reflection from the lamp in the sheriff's office—a temporary shed about fifty yards away—reached him faintly. He was so tall he couldn't stand entirely straight in the tiny cage; he stood with sagging knees, like a man standing in a moving wagon. His stomach was beginning to growl louder than his conscience.

A form came out of the darkness.

"Hay," came a hoarse whisper.

"Is that you?" Tarp whispered, coming up to the cell.

"I ain't sure whether it's me or something in a circus. Look how they got these animal cages lined up here."

Tarp looked. The cages sat on a narrow ledge, just above a road which wound past the courthouse site.

"Maybe they ain't far off, at that," Tarp considered, peering through the bars at the stooped figure, arms hanging in ape-like fashion.

"They's more peculiar animals runnin' loose than was ever caught," Brindle retorted. "Why don't you get that salt gathered up and get back to the ranch?"

"Leavin' you in a jam like this?" Tarp asked, righteously. He added, more truthfully, "Pot-bellied Pete will be keepin' an eye on that salt."

Brindle took hold of the bars and shook them in impotent humiliation.

"Be careful," Tarp warned, "or you'll upset that thing."

Brindle stood for a moment, gripping the bars, transfixed with an idea suggested by Tarp's remark.

"Where's the team and wagon?" he asked.

"Back over the hill."

"This thing wouldn't be hard to load on that flat-bed wagon," he reflected.

"Then what?" Tarp demanded.

"Haul it off somewhere and saw me out of here."

Tarp looked at the road below. The wagon would come almost to the top of the ledge on which the cell sat.

"You could stop the wagon right there," Brindle urged. "Then get behind with a crow-bar, and ease this thing right onto it."

TARP glanced at the sheriff's office. "Mighty risky," he said. "They'd be sure to hear me drive up here. But," he added, hopefully, "I'll get a hack-saw and you can saw yourself out right here."

"Reckon a hack-saw wouldn't make no noise," Brindle said, sarcastically. "If he heard a wagon comin' up this road, he wouldn't think nothin' about it, but if he heard a hack-saw—"

"All right, I'll try it," Tarp agreed. "But I think it's a damn-fool notion."

Tarp started off. Another figure emerged from the darkness.

"Don't break away!" It was Sheriff Ruckton's voice. "Unless you want me to take a crack at you— Who is it?"

He came closer. "Yeh, I thought so. I knowed you'd come snoopin' around, if I stayed away."

A moment later he was gone; and Tarp and Brindle were facing each other in the little cell.

"You played hell, didn't you?" Brindle said.

"All your fault, you wagon-head. If you hadn't of fell off that load—"

"And if you hadn't gone proddy there in the saloon—"

Mutual incriminations gradually turned into morose silence. The lamp in the sheriff's office went out. The sheriff, feeling that he had no further need to watch his prisoners, had gone home. The side of the gulch was dotted with lights. A blaze of light was coming from the saloon.

Tarp and Brindle were hunkered on their knees, staring glumly at these spots of cheer and warmth, when they heard someone coming up the hill.

Presently the outline of a flat, leering face appeared at the bars. "Howdy, boys." It was a hoarse voice, chortling.

"Old pancake, himself," muttered Brindle. "Come to give us the horse laugh."

"They told me Ruckton locked you boys up, but I couldn't believe it till I'd seen you," said the saloon bouncer.

"Naw?"

"Naw. The way one of you, by himself, worked me over, I don't see how old Pot-belly could have handled you both."

Tarp and Brindle were puzzled. They said nothing.

"I ain't one to hold a grudge," Kurk, the saloon buster, went on. "And I hope you boys don't hold no grudge ag'in' me. I've got a plumb distasteful job, but a man's got to work at somethin'. I used to be a box-fighter, but there ain't nothin' in that any more. I hate to throw guys out of a saloon, especially guys like you. I heard you tell him you'd pay for them drinks the next time you come to town, and I believe you. But what could I do. He's the boss, and I had to do what he told me."

Brindle thawed out immediately. He was not one to hold a grudge, either.

Tarp was more reluctant. Of course, it was Tarp who had come in more direct contact with the saloon buster, and he couldn't forget so easily.

To find out just how sincere was Kurk's protestations, he suggested, "Maybe you could help us get out of here."

"I'm pretty flat," said the bouncer. "I'm afraid I couldn't pay you out. Anything else, though."

"Can you drive a pair of mules, hitched to a wagon?"

"If they ain't wild, I guess I can."

"All right, you go back across the gulch and up the main road till you come to Charley's blacksmith shop. Out behind his shop you'll find the mules. Get a hack-saw from Charley—he lives in the house next to his shop—and drive back up here."

"I don't get you, exactly."

"Just go ahead and do what I said," Tarp replied. "And the next time we come to town, we'll square it with you, as well as our other obl'gations."

Kurk went away, promising to do as directed.

"Mighty gone-damned decent of him, I'd say," Brindle declared. "After the way you beat up on him."

"I don't know about that," Tarp said doubtfully. "It looks sort of queer to me. That jasper ain't got no love for us. I'll bet he don't show up no more. He was just rubbin' it in, that's all."

"That's just like you," Brindle said, in disgust. "Hard-headed and soured on the world. Ain't got no trust in your fellermen, that's what's the matter with you."

BUT Brindle wasn't so confident as he pretended. He was agreeably surprised when Kurk returned about thirty minutes later, with the team and wagon.

It wasn't much of a task for Kurk to slide the little cell off the ledge onto the flat bed of the wagon. He passed the hack-saw and the lines through the bars to the prisoners.

"Mister," said Brindle fervently, "we'll never forget what you done for us this night. It was all-fired decent of you, and we'll make it right with you."

"That's all right," said the bouncer. "Better get goin', while the goin's good."

It was a queer outfit that swung silently down a side road, avoiding the courthouse plaza. Nobody saw it closely enough to arouse any curiosity.

There was a hazy moon, sufficient to guide them, but not bright enough to hinder escape. As soon as they were safely out of town, Tarp began work with the saw.

"I can't figger out that saloon buster," Tarp said. "He ain't doin' this to help us out. He's got somethin' else up his sleeve."

"There you go agin," Brindle challenged. "What could he have up his sleeve?" But he, too, had been thinking the same thing.

"I don't know. But he didn't do it because he loved us so. I seen his eyes glitterin', and he had a mean grin on his face. He must of wanted to get us out of town for some reason."

But the reason, if there was one, was too elusive. Tarp sawed through the first bar.

"Reckon we can sneak back to town, and load up our salt?" he pondered.

"If we show up at the ranch with the sheriff's jail instead of a load of salt, you can just about figger what Cal will say."

They kept driving, and sawing. Another bar was severed. Before the third bar could be cut, a disturbing sound reached them.

"Sounds like hosses," said Brindle. He drew the mules to a stop, better to listen.

"It *is* hosses," said Tarp.

"And they're comin' fast!"

"The sheriff."

"Shore."

"What'll we do?"

"Saw like hell!" said Brindle.

"And drive like hell!" said Tarp. "The faster you drive, the more time I'll have to saw."

The lines came down with bull-whop smartness on the rumps of the mules. They started with a jerk. Brindle poured on the lines. Faster now. They hit a down grade. Brindle shouted at the team and pounded them with the lines. Tarp was bearing down on the saw.

Brindle got the mules in a run. They were getting scared. "Run!" shouted the driver. "See if I give a damn!"

The lines popped. The wagon creaked and swayed. The cage slid to one side as the wagon hit a deep rut.

"If this ain't hell on wheels, what is it?" shouted Brindle.

"Watch where you're goin'," yelled Tarp. "I can't saw on this thing when it's jumpin' out from under me."

The bottom of the hill was reached. The grade was sharply upward now. A vigorous dose of leather made the mules jump as they reached the bottom and started up. The jump together with the slant on the wagon caused the cell to slip backward. It was prevented from slipping off the wagon by coming up against the hind wheels, which came up above the level of the bed.

This was fortunate in one way, and decidedly unfortunate in another. The cage, rubbing against the wheels, acted as a brake. The mules were having difficulty in pulling the wagon.

"We're stuck!" moaned Tarp. "Turn off here!"

"Where?"

"In this gulch. Drive into them trees."

"But there ain't no road!"

"Make one. Here gimme them lines!"

"You keep sawin'!" roared Brindle. He swung the team off the road into a little, boulder-strewn gulch, through scrub oaks and pinon.

The ride down the road was like jogging along in a rubber-tired buggy, compared to the dash up that gulch. But it lasted only a minute. The team hung up, trying to straddle a tree, and came to a stop that sent the occupants of the cage headlong into the bars.

IN the stunned interim that followed, Brindle and Tarp could hear the horsemen sweeping down the hill, at the bottom of which the team and wagon had been sidetracked. The cowhands held their breaths. The mules stood still, each straining to pull away from the tree.

At the bottom of the hill, the clatter of hoofs did not stop. The riders were going past. Brindle and Tarp listened to the receding hoofbeats, hearts and eardrums throbbing.

"How many riders in that bunch?" Brindle asked, abruptly.

"About four. Why?"

"How many deputies has Ruckton got?"

"Three, I think."

"H-m-m. Him and all of his deputies. There ain't a Law left in Highlow."

"You mean—"

"Maybe. Keep sawin'. We got to go back to pick up that salt, anyhow. We can take the other road out."

Brindle could turn the team around in the gulch. Tarp sawed the third bar in two. The pieces were sprung aside, and the two prisoners crawled out. The team was unhitched, and the wagon pushed back into the road by hand.

"What'll we do with the cage?" Tarp asked.

"Take it back to town. The sheriff might need it again."

The team was hooked up.

"Better dust off their tails," Tarp said. "The sheriff is liable to find out anytime that he's on a cold trail, and turn back."

The shack-dotted gulch that was Highlow appeared peaceful enough when Tarp and Brindle wound down the cliff road that led to the main part of town.

"Let's hitch these mules behind these sheds and take a pasear down behind the saloon. If anything is due to break, she'll break there first, like as not."

He reached into the tool box on the front end of the wagon and drew forth two guns and belts. He handed one to Tarp, and buckled the other one about his waist.

They went down to the saloon, and peered through a dusty rear window. There was a fair-sized crowd in the place. The long bar was holding up convivial souls of all descriptions and conditions. There were poker and faro tables near the rear. Stacks of silver and currency were prominently displayed.

"Don't see Flat-nose nowhere," Tarp commented.

"Well, we can't wait around here. Maybe we had a bum hunch."

They were on the point of turning away when they heard footsteps down the alley. They were cautious steps. Brindle and Tarp retreated to the shadow of a jutting timber.

The footsteps drew near. Dimly, two men could be seen. They paused at the back door of the saloon, barely ten feet from the Cross-Up men. They went in the back door.

Brindle and Tarp heard a stentorian command—"HandZUP!" It cracked out like a whip, paralyzing all motion and sound.

Brindle's long neck twisted, and his eyes came up to a level with the high, barred back window. He saw two masked men advancing from the front door. He saw, also, the backs of the pair who had just entered the rear door, the knots of red bandanas at the back of their heads, between their ears. From a side door, he saw two more armed men coming, handkerchiefs tied under their eyes.

"In a crowd like this," shouted one of the masked men, "there's bound to be some damn fools!"

He paused a moment, then snapped, "Who's goin' to be the first one?"

Not a hoisted palm wavered.

"No?" the bandit questioned. Then, "All right! Everybody line up at the bar!"

As the patrons backed toward the bar, the spokesman shouted, "In case you don't know it, there's a half a dozen of us, on three sides of you. Keep elevated, gents, and keep healthy!"

"Sounds kind of like old Flat-Nose, don't it?" Tarp whispered.

"Sure, it's him."

They understood Kurk's plan, now. The saloon bouncer had helped them escape, then tipped off the sheriff. The stage was set for the hold-up as soon as the officers got out of town.

"What'll we do?" Brindle muttered.

"Maybe we better go get our salt," Tarp suggested.

"How we goin' to manage it, that's what I mean. If we bust in there now—"

"There'll be the biggest massa-kree this town has ever seen," Tarp finished.

The hold-up was moving off smoothly. Two of the bandits were gathering the money from the gambling tables. The other four were giving eight guns a good view of the entire situation.

THE searching of patrons started. One man dropped his hands suddenly. A gun in the hands of the bandit leader exploded. The victim fell backward, grabbing at his gun. Another bullet caught him more squarely.

It was cold out there in the alley, where Tarp and Brindle crouched. They were just beginning to notice it. The cold night air went through them, hit their backbones, and coursed up and down.

"Do you see what I see?" Brindle asked tersely.

"What?"

"Cal! Right down there about middle way. Next to the tall jasper with the white hat."

"It's him," Tarp groaned. "Shore as shootin'."

"He's so gone-damned little we overlooked him."

"Look. They're shakin' him down now."

Brindle turned. "Let's get around to the front. Their hosses will be there, I reckon."

"We ain't never goin' to get back to the Cross-Up with that salt," Tarp muttered. "I feel it in my salt-shaker."

They crept around the corner of the saloon, and along the side of the building. Brindle, in the lead, paused. "By the side door," he whispered.

Grouped around the darkened side door was a bunch of horses. Working his way closer, Brindle could see a man astride one of the animals. He drew his gun, and crept nearer. He managed to get to the side of the mounted man before being discovered.

The rider whirled his horse. His gun, too, was ready. Brindle, realizing a shot would spoil everything, threw himself at the rider. He managed to get hold of the rider's gun arm and drag him from the saddle. He kept his thumb off the hammer of his own gun, but used the barrel to a good advantage.

Tarp ran up. He offered to take a hand. But Brindle had his man pretty well tamed.

"Just grab the hosses," Brindle whispered.

One of the horses got away, but Tarp got the rest of them. Brindle laid his man against the wall, and figured he would lie there for some time.

"Now, we got to handle the rest of 'em as they come out," he said.

"Here they come now," said Tarp.

The retreat of the bandits was well ordered. All backed toward the side door, but one. He came well in advance of the others to see that the coast was clear.

He stepped outside. "All set?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," said Brindle, in a muffled voice.

"Where's mine?" The bandit approached the horses.

"Here," said Brindle, and let him have it. But not the horse. The blow was well-timed and neatly disposed of the first of the sextette.

At the door, two more of them turned and stepped outside. "Straighten 'em out," one said gruffly.

"Yeah," muttered Brindle, and did what he could toward the straightening-out process. This time he was not immediately successful. The bandit escaped the first blow, leaped back, and fired.

Surprise measures were over. At the flash of the outlaw's gun, Brindle and Tarp opened up. The other bandits, who were crowding through the doorway, whirled about, shooting.

A BRIEF exchange of shots, and two men in the door went down. Two more tried to escape through the saloon, but that was out of the question. The saloon patrons took a hand.

One bandit, who had been felled early in the fight, got to his feet again. He had lost his gun. He started to run, grabbing a sack of loot from the fingers of a dead companion.

Brindle fired at him, but missed. His gun was empty now. If given a second's respite, the bandit would be lost in the darkness. Brindle leaped after him.

They ran down the alley. Brindle stumbled and fell, but bounced up, running. Across the road they dashed. The bandit made a dive for cover behind some sheds, and came up against the Cross-Up team and wagon, where it had been left by the punchers.

Brindle caught the man. The sack, containing enough silver to give it weight, descended on Brindle's head. The damage was not serious. He got hold of the bandit again and bore him heavily to the ground.

For a moment they fondled each other like a couple of tail-tied Tom cats. In the darkness, alone, they had a mighty good chance to take each other to pieces without interference.

When the jamboree was over, Brindle felt as though he had lost a swell fight; but he was still able to stand up, and the other fellow couldn't. The latter was through, but not out entirely. He could still groan.

Brindle couldn't leave him, and couldn't carry him. He had all he could do to get around, himself.

The mules, a few yards away, moved restlessly.

"I'll haul you in," Brindle decided. But he had to sit down a minute, and get his wind.

Then he dragged his victim to the wagon. As an added precaution, he forced the man into the cage. Then he drove down the alley, and around to the front of the saloon.

A crowd surged about him.

"There's my jail!"

The shout was one of mingled surprise and triumph. It came from Sheriff Ruckton.

He pushed through the crowd to the side of the wagon. He stared at the crumpled figure inside the cage, at the severed bars, and at Brindle.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Runnin' off with my jail that way!"

"I brung it back to you, didn't I?" Brindle asked mildly.

The man inside the cage groaned and sat up. He blinked at the crowd. His face was bruised and bleeding, but not beyond instant recognition.

"Kurk!" exclaimed the sheriff. Then, dozedly, "What in hell's been goin' on around here, anyhow?"

He had just returned to town, after discovering he was on a cold trail. He hadn't had time to learn the details of the frustrated hold-up.

He soon learned them. Not only from Tarp and Brindle, but from many witnesses, including Cal Triggerton, boss of the Cross-Up.

"For a wonder," Triggerton said, "them two loafers was on hand at the right time. I was anxious to get that load of salt, so I come on to see about it. Just got here when the fire-works started."

"If you got no objections, sheriff," Brindle suggested, with a side glance at his boss. We'll turn this hi-jacker over to you along with your jail, load up our salt, and be on our way."

"Shore! Shore!" the sheriff exclaimed heartily. "And the next time you boys want to borrow my jail, just help yourselves!"

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Carrying the Law Into the Mesquite

By William MacLeod Raine

"SHOT-GUN" SMITH had just been acquitted by a jury of his peers of the crime of cattle rustling and was consequently celebrating the occasion by "tanking up," as he himself would phrase it, with a company of choice friends at the Holbrook hotel bar. His tongue was in that state of eloquence common to the "bad man" when he drinks. He was extemporizing a poem in profanity. It was in blank verse and the subject of it was the things he would do to one Mossman when he came across him. For Burton Mossman, superintendent of the Aztec Cattle Company, commonly known as the "Hashknife Outfit," had sought and found the evidence that would have convicted him before another jury.

At this moment, as fate would have it, enter Mossman upon the stage of action. The barkeeper warned him of the situation by a lift of the eyebrow, and Mossman could easily have stepped out of the front room without being observed by those behind. Another man probably would have done this, but that is not Mossman's way. He sauntered into the barroom, cool and easy and debonair, nodded coolly and ordered a drink. "Shot-gun's" hand stole back to his belt. The superintendent of the Axtec Cattle Company looked at him out of those steel-gray eyes of his.

"I wouldn't if I were you, 'Shot-Gun,'" he said quietly. "Shot-Gun's" eyes fell; his hand dropped from the coveted revolver handle. There was something compelling about this little man's quiet manner that induced a change of mind on his part. He suddenly remembered an engagement elsewhere.

A few years ago some of the big cattlemen thought of going out of the business. Mormon and Gentile rustlers and Mexican border thieves were stealing and branding their cattle by hundreds. Legal convictions were apparently impossible because of the lack of absolute evidence in each individual case. Even if a calf was recognized as belonging to a certain "outfit," the rustler had but to plead that he had branded it by mistake: "I didn't know the calf, but it sure was following my cow." Up to the time that Burton Mossman went in as superintendent of the Axtec Cattle Company no conviction for cattle stealing had been obtained by them for fourteen years. Within ten months of his incumbency Mossman had twelve miscreants landed in the penitentiary under conviction of cattle stealing. He always took the field himself with his deputies and worked up the case personally. The result was that he able to secure evidence that resulted in seriously crippling the business of the desperadoes of Navajo and Apache Counties.

Mossman's life was threatened again and again, and he was in a dozen serious affrays. On March 17, '99, in company with a deputy sheriff he had a fight with the Baca gang of Mexicans in which the two Americans drove away the gang of five and captured one of them. The shooting was so close that Mossman's bridle rein was divided in his hand. The gang returned for reinforcements, while Mossman and the deputy hurried their prisoner away with his feet tied under a horse, to the nearest town. They traveled by day, and stood guard over him for two nights until they reached the county-seat, sixty-five miles away, just twenty-five minutes ahead of the bloodthirsty troop of Mexican bandits.

"Gone to Texas!" Away back in the sixties this expression held a sinister meaning. To use it of a man was to imply that he was at outs with the law. But the forward-lapping tide of civilization has changed all that, and one mighty factor in the change was the stalwart little band of men known as the Texas Rangers. A little later than the sixties something of this

same cloud hung over Arizona's clear title to a claim as a law-abiding community. From Austin and San Antonio to Abilene, from Abilene to Dodge City—from this "worst town on earth" westward to Las Vegas and Santa Fe, and from thence to the virgin southwest of Tucson and Tombstone, a crooked line of this sporadic frontier lawlessness took its sway. In each of them the "bad man" found his habitat for the time until encroaching civilization drove him to new pastures.

By special reasons of locality, frontier conditions prevailed longer in Arizona than elsewhere. This was due to the facts that it is a cattle country with its consequent temptations to rustling, that the population was sparse, and to the proximity of the Mexican line. At any rate, for long, murderers and desperadoes infested the headwaters of the San Francisco, Salt and Black Rivers among the almost inaccessible mountain wilds. It was to meet this condition of affairs that the second Arizona territorial Legislature authorized Governor Murphy to organize a company of Rangers. Of this company, Mr. Burton Mossman was selected to be the captain. He accepted the appointment purely out of a sense of duty and adventure, since the pay attached to the post was five dollars a month less than his chief clerk was receiving at the time.

SINCE his friend Bucky O'Neil's death in Cuba, Burton Mossman is probably the most picturesque character in Arizona, but at first glance he does not look the part. He is a well-groomed little fellow, falls easily into graceful attitudes and gives the impression of being a typical languid clubman rather than a frontiersman of unusual nerve and daring. This is the first thought, but presently you notice that there is endurance in his well-knit frame and that his cold gray eye is like steel. His easy imperturbable manner, together with his instinctively alert mind and his keen knowledge of character combine to make him a most formidable poker player. One saw him rake in a five hundred dollar jackpot without a flicker of an eyelid, after a remarkably cool play. Governor Murphy showed judgment of men when he chose Burton Mossman to be captain of the Rangers.

The work assigned to these Rangers was an arduous and a dangerous one. For many years sheriff's officers and vigilantes had found themselves entirely unable to cope with the lawless bands which made their headquarters in the bad lands. But the condition of affairs had grown unendurable. The temerity of the outlaws was not only a scourge to the community, but a menace to the good name of the Territory. No man's sheep or cattle were safe from the raids of the organized bands of outlaws, who would sweep down on a range, drive away the cattle, and reach the mountain fastnesses long before the posse could be organized for pursuit. Raids and murders had become so common that they were scarcely noted. There were a dozen bands of these murderous horse and cattle thieves, at the head of which were such men as "Bill" Smith, the notorious Augustine Chacon, commonly called "Pelelo," and the train robber, Burt Alvord. Yet within a year of the time of its organization, this little band of Rangers, consisting of a captain, a sergeant and twelve privates, had practically cleared the territory of hundreds of bad characters. Many of them had paid for their lawlessness with their lives and the rest had been driven across the line into Mexico.

The Rangers' work had been so effective that it is a matter of surprise to those who understand the conditions under which they operated. Captain Mossman's plan was to keep the men always armed, mounted and equipped, so that they might be ready to get right after their men as soon as word came in from the cattle camps that rustlers or raiders had been at work. The Rangers were divided into little squads and sent out either alone or in pairs to scout along the borders or upon some definite detail. In many cases they went hundreds of miles into territory where they were not known at all. For weeks and even months no news was heard of them, until some day the ranger sent a report to headquarters that his man was landed in prison with enough evidence to convict him. The Rangers were recruited from old cow-boys, and from the ranks of Roosevelt's Rough Riders. They had to be able to rope and ride anything on four legs, as their horses might be killed and remounts were at times absolutely necessary. Especially quick work was required in heading fugitives from the border.

A crime is reported, the ranger slaps on the saddle and is away. To the credit

of the ranger it may be said that nine times out of ten he brings back his man, dead or alive.

Shortly after the organization of the Rangers the Tucumcara band of outlaws led by Bill Daniels robbed the post-office and store near Fort Sumner, held up the men about the station and killed a boy who stood there with his hands up among the rest. They were followed a hundred miles by the United States Territorial officials across the Arizona lines. Before they had been in Arizona a week the Arizona Rangers had captured four of them near the head-waters of the Blue River, securing from them an arsenal of arms, over a thousand rounds of ammunition, wire pincers to cut fences, and other paraphernalia. In their mountain fastnesses they were prepared to stand a long siege, but Mossman's dashing Rangers rushed in on them and took them hot-foot. Witt Neil and one Roberts were taken in bed, two more were ambushed, and Sam Bass was followed across the Mexican line and secured.

SCARCELY a month had passed before word reached Captain Mossman of a serious reverse to his troops. A few of them had been following the notorious Bill Smith gang and had come on them suddenly. A long running fight through the mesquite and chaparral ensued. Finally Bill Smith proposed to surrender, and came forward without a gun. Bill Maxwell and Carlos Tefio, both of whom were noted for their extreme courage, stepped forward to indicate where the gang might lay down their arms. Smith pretended to stumble behind a stump, seized a rifle which he had hidden there, and treacherously murdered Maxwell. A moment later Tefio also was shot through the bowels. He knew the wound was mortal, but shot twelve times from his tracks before he fell — then crawled back to his horse and died. For many hours the fight was at the very close range of one hundred and twenty-five yards, but in the darkness of the following night the outlaws made their escape.

Captain Mossman flung a saddle on his bronco and hurried to the scene of action. With him were two expert San Carlos Apache Indian trailers named "Kid" and "Josh." In all the West there are none more expert at the business than these two. An incident in the history of Josh almost parallels one mentioned by Scott in his "Legend of Montrose." The famous "Apache Kid" had come into the Indian reservation, stolen a woman and later killed her. He repeated the performance and this time brought with him a partner, dubbed Amigo, who also secured a woman. The commander of the fort promised a sergeantcy of scouts to Josh if he would kill or capture Amigo, but added the stipulation that if he failed to secure him he would lose his job. Josh accepted the proposition philosophically and disappeared from the fort. For several weeks nothing was heard of him. One day as the commander was looking over some papers in his office, a shadow fell across the sunlit desk. As there had been no sound to indicate the approach of anyone the colonel at once concluded it was an Indian. He looked up to see Josh.

"Did you get him?"

"Yes, Colonel, me got him," answered Josh imperturbably, then from a sack in his hand rolled the murderer's head out on the table.

For twenty-two days Mossman and his guides followed the trail of Smith. The weather was at the worst. It rained repeatedly and obliterated the trail, and a snow storm came up and impeded the pursuers. The trail was found again and resumed. For eight days the outlaws were pressed so close that they had to wander horseless in the mountain fastnesses. Several of them were wounded. But from the McKean ranch they secured remounts and again escaped. In many places the trail was far too rough to follow on horseback, but the indefatigable pursuers never despaired. Finally, despite his exertions, Captain Mossman was beaten, for a second snow storm hid the trail for days and enabled the bandits to cross the line into New Mexico. But they had had enough of Arizona and her Rangers and have since given them a clear berth.

Two of the most signal feats in which Captain Mossman was individually concerned was the running down at different times of the notorious Mexican bandits Salivaras and Chacon. The first of these cut-throats had murdered the superintendent of the Calico mines, while the latter was transporting gold across the mountains to pay off his men. Salivaras took to the cactus-covered desert and struck far across it to a water hole along an unfrequented trail known to but few. His horse gave out

and died at Paradise Valley, and the highwayman followed the novel procedure of burying himself up to the chin in mud with his booty beneath him and a bunch of Spanish bayonet in front to conceal his head. Soon Mossman came up and his dogs went straight to the outlaw, who crawled from his hole and opened fire. His bullet got Mossman in the side, but on the return shot the captain of the Rangers hit Salivaras in the breast and ended his career.

AUGUSTINE CHACON was the leader of the worst gang of outlaws that ever infested the border. He had a known record of killing twenty-eight persons, and doubtless many unknown victims had fallen by his rifle. In 1896 Chacon's gang robbed a store near Morenci, cut the storekeeper to pieces with knives, and got away followed by a sheriff's posse. In the fight that ensued Chacon killed Pablo Salcido, a deputy sheriff, while under a flag of truce. The deed was witnessed by the whole posse, but though two of Chacon's gang were killed he himself escaped for the moment. Shot through the body shortly afterward he was captured, convicted and sentenced to be hung. Influential friends worked hard for him and carried the case to the Supreme Court, which reaffirmed the decision of the lower court. Six days before the time set for his hanging, with the connivance of a woman, Chacon broke jail and crossed the line into Mexico. Here he joined Mexican border guards for a year and a half, when he had a difficulty with another soldier and deserted. He resumed with increased ferocity his career of highway robbery and murder, flitting to and fro across the Arizona-Mexican line at his convenience. On one occasion he passed within a mile or two of Solomonville, where the sentence of death was still hanging over his head, and went up Eagle Creek into the mountain gorges. Here he killed two prospectors and for two weeks was followed by the sheriff's posses, but again reached and passed the line in safety. From now on he crossed to and fro continually to steal horses and pursue his vocation of murder.

At this time Burt Alvord, the leader of the bank of train robbers who held up the Southern Pacific train at Sonora, was living as a fugitive in Mexico. He had escaped from the Tombstone jail in 1899, and was for three years an outlaw in the brush while his fellow train robbers were serving long terms in the penitentiary. Mossman heard indirectly of Alvord's whereabouts through sheriff Tom Turner of Santa Cruz and Del Lewis of Cochise County. These two men, armed with extradition papers obtained from the governor of Sonora, had crossed and attempted Alvord's capture. Warned by local officers of their approach, Alvord had escaped by two hours' start in the mountains. Mossman knew Alvord had worked with Chacon on some of his raids and conceived the idea of using Alvord as a stool pigeon. The ranger captain went alone into Minas Pritas, where he secured a four-horse team and drove to San Jose de Pima. There he got a saddle horse and took to the brush for days in the hope of running down on the camp of Alvord. At last he found the man at a lonely adobe hut on a high range overlooking the country. When Captain Mossman rode up, quite unarmed, Alvord was standing alone outside the hut. Inside, his men were gambling and playing cards. Mossman had never seen the outlaw, but recognized him by his pictures.

"I suppose I am talking to the noted bandit, Burt Alvord," said Captain Mossman by way of beginning the conversation.

Alvord laughed and nodded: "Who are you?"

"My name is Mossman. I am the captain of the Arizona Rangers."

"The devil you are!" Alvord's keen eye ranged the mesquite covered hill in search of hidden troops and instinctively his hand went to his hip.

It was Mossman's turn to laugh, and he did it easy and naturally. "Oh, I am not such a fool as to come looking for you this way if my visit were not friendly. I am alone and in your power. I want to talk with you, but as I am hungry, suppose you feed me first."

Mossman stayed twenty-four hours with Burt Alvord as his guest. He knew that at any moment the train robber might become suspicious and shoot him down like a dog, but he manifested no nervousness even though he was afraid that the sudden appearance of the Mexican Rangers with Sheriff Turner might ring his death knell. Alvord was tired of the hard life he had been living in the brush, and before Mossman had left him the outlaw had agreed to find Chacon and induce him to cross

the line into the United States. Alvord wanted somebody to act as his messenger to Mossman, and at his suggestion Billy Stiles, who was one of the Southern Pacific train robbers in Alvord's gang, was chosen. Stiles had given evidence which secured the conviction of his confederates and had afterward joined the Arizona Rangers.

It was on the 22nd of April, 1902, that Mossman first met Alvord; but the train robber did not run across Chacon before July. Then Alvord had to accompany Chacon down to the Yaqui with some stolen horses. Finally they came back, Stiles having already joined them. Alvord sent Stiles ahead to notify Captain Mossman of their approach with this message:

"In nine days meet us twenty-five miles within the Mexican line at the Socorro mountain spring, joining us as a confederate."

Captain Mossman and Stiles rode to the spring, but missing Alvord and Chacon came back to the American side. They had ridden all night and loafed the day away in the chaparral. At nightfall Mossman sent Stiles forward across the line to an adobe hut where Alvord's wife lived, thinking that possibly the man might be there. On the way there Stiles met the two outlaws and returned with them to a barb wire fence which separates the American from the Mexican side. There they met Mossman. After some parley the fence was cut and the ranger captain joined them on the Mexican side. Burt Alvord introduced Mossman as an outlaw desirous of joining their gang and Chacon was apparently satisfied. Together they planned to rustle a bunch of horses from Greene's pasture, which is seven miles on the American side.

THE four men rode down the line for several miles, then crossed at Greene's ranch. The night had fallen black with no moon and they found it too dark to rob the pasture. They made a fire of greasewood and camped beside it. One may conceive that even Mossman's jaunty nerves must have been strained to the uttermost during that night. He was in a situation the most uncertain, for it was entirely within the possibilities that he might be the victim of a ruse and that the three bandits would murder him in his sleep. Before daybreak Alvord tiptoed across to where Mossman lay and announced that he was going to leave him.

"I brought Chacon to you, but you don't seem able to take him. I've done my share and I don't want him to suspect me. Remember that if you take him you have promised that the reward shall go to me, and that you'll stand by me at my trial if I surrender. You sure want to be mighty careful, or he'll kill you. So long."

Mossman nodded and Alvord stealthily departed. When Chacon woke and found that Alvord was not of the party his suspicions at once were aroused. Stiles suggested that they then go after the Greene ranch horses, but Chacon said they had better eat breakfast first. During breakfast time he said scarcely a word, but his suspicions grew more active. When Stiles and Mossman made the fire and fried the bacon on the end of a stick he sat back and lowered at Mossman. His fugitive eyes never left the ranger's face. Every move was watched with a lynx-like intensity.

The ranger captain now realized that getting the drop on his man would be no easy matter. His rifle lay a few yards from the fire, but he never wandered from it more than two or three paces. He, too, had grown suspicious, knowing well that Chacon was meditating sending a bullet through his heart if opportunity offered. Chacon's wariness was by no means a conviction that treachery was meant him, but it would take a great deal less than conviction to make the Mexican murderer shoot. After breakfast Chacon announced decisively that he would go no further in the business. Mossman shrugged his shoulders and said it didn't matter to him. As Chacon understood English Mossman had no chance to converse with Stiles privately, and presently the bandit announced that he was going back across the line.

Mossman knew the moment for action had come. Chacon and Stiles were squatting side by side smoking cigarettes. The ranger captain sauntered forward and asked Chacon for one, saying that he always liked those Mexican cigarettes. He then backed to the fire, stooped, and with his left hand picked up a glowing juniper branch. This he changed to his right hand and lit the cigarette, his eyes still on Chacon. He came back toward the two men, puffing the smoke carelessly. When it was well lighted he dropped the juniper stick, his hand falling to his side; then as he raised his hand, with the same movement

—like a flash—his revolver came out. Chacon was covered.

"Hands up, Chacon."

Chacon's face never quivered. "Is this a joke?" he asked.

"No. Throw your hands up or you're a dead man."

Chacon sparred for time. "I don't see as it makes any difference after he is dead whether a man's hands are up or down. You're going to kill me anyway, why don't you shoot?"

Mossman had been dubious of Stiles. He was afraid that the latter would side with the winning man. If he secured Chacon he knew the ranger would remain true, but if the cards went against him he was not to be relied upon. Mossman's move then had the additional advantage of covering Stiles too if anything went wrong.

Chacon's eyes never wavered from those of Mossman, but by burning concentration he attempted to make the latter shift his gaze for just one instant. The tenth part of a second would have been long enough, for he was the quickest man on the frontier with a gun. But in Mossman he met his match. The ranger chief ordered Stiles to disarm him, and from the lining of his coat Stiles ripped a pair of handcuffs and slipped them on the bandit. Immediately the three men headed toward the railroad. Several times Chacon attempted to throw himself from his horse.

"I'll drag you by your neck to the railroad," Mossman told him.

Stiles led the way followed by Chacon, while Mossman touched up his horse from behind. Mossman boarded the train with him, took him to Benson and delivered him to the sheriff. He was hanged at Solomonville. The man died game, showing the coolest daring on the scaffold. He laughed and joked with his executioners, smoked a cigarette without a tremor and was apparently unconcerned. Just before his arms were pinioned, he waved a jaunty hand and cried, "Adios, amigo."

Mossman resigned his commission as captain of the Rangers about this time, and Lieutenant Thomas Rynning of Troop B, Roosevelt's Rough Riders, was appointed by Governor Brodie to succeed him. It is sufficient to say of Captain Rynning that while his work is not so dramatic as Mossman's, it is just as soldierly and effective. He has continued the policy begun by the former, of hunting thieves and murderers with such steady continuity that, one after another, they have found their business unprofitable. It may be predicted confidently that within a year or two Arizona will be as free of horse and cattle rustlers as Kansas itself at this time.

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"The Ridin' Fool"

An Off the Trail Novelette

by

Harry Sinclair Drago

CHAPTER I

"Stay a Long Time, Cowboy!"

ON the Western "street" at the far end of the Important Pictures lot they were shooting the last scenes of another of the interminable series of Western thrillers starring the redoubtable Tom Remington and his wonder horse, Toby. Microphones and cameras were now in position in front of the Last Chance saloon.

According to the script, the star, as the sheriff of Pima County, had surprised the outlaw gang, fresh from their latest stage-coach robbery, and single-handed had stuck them up and recovered the loot. He was now in the act of backing out of the saloon to do a breath-taking leap to Toby's back and make good his get-away before the bandit guns could mow him down.

Unfortunately, the scene would not "play" to the satisfaction of Lefty Keenan, the director, and not through any fault of the star. Tom Remington, lounging comfortably in a canvas beach chair, looked on with bored indifference from the cool shade of the 'dobe church across the way as an utterly miserable double, dressed to represent him, struggled with this bit of dramatic action.

They began to run through the scene again. Lefty's whistle stopped them. He had made so many Westerns that the directing of them had become a more or less perfunctory routine. But he knew what he wanted. They had been on this scene for over an hour now without a camera turning. He called Vic Rosemon, his assistant, up to the camera platform where he sat.

As they conferred, principals and extras found opportunity to convey, by word and glance, some measure of the contempt they felt for the man doubling for Tom Remington. His name was Luther Stillings. He was a tall man, narrow-hipped and with a lean jaw and keener eyes than one usually finds in Hollywood. For three days he had been trying, as he never had tried before, to do as he was told. But the task he had set himself seemed hopeless. There was a grim look on his face as he flashed a glance at Bonnie Williams seated beside the sound truck and well in back of the camera lines.

Bonnie supplied the romantic interest in the Tom Remington Westerns. Cool and lovely, and completely at home in the hurly-burly of make-believe which surrounded her, she gave him a reassuring smile and a curious little shake of her blonde head that conveyed her thought perfectly. It was nothing less than that he must not lose patience. She had known Luther Stillings long enough to sense the storm that was gathering within him. If it broke, little Vic Rosemon and these others, who had been pushing him around and deriding him for over an hour, would find an avalanche overwhelming them. And Luther Stillings would be through in pictures. She didn't want that to happen.

Her smile seemed to have the desired effect on him. He squared his shoulders resolutely when Vic, the assistant director, descended on him like an angry little ant.

"I'm going to walk through this for you once more, Stillings," Vic snapped out venomously. "Mr. Keenan is afraid you don't understand what we're trying to get." His tone was mocking now. "God knows, I've told you a dozen times already. Can't you see you're holding up the entire company? It's after four o'clock, and we've got a couple more scenes to shoot before we lose the light. Now watch me and see if you can't get this into that thick skull of yours!"

He picked up the canvas bag that held the loot and took Luther's six-gun in his other hand.

"Now you back out like this," he scolded. "You don't spring out like you'd just seen a ghost, and you don't come out so darn slow you'd think you were going to spend the rest of your life around here. You've just stuck up six dangerous men; you know they're coming after you; your life is in danger. Can you understand that?"

"I think I do," Luther answered glumly, conscious of the twittering of the other extras.

"Well, I hope so," Vic ground out. "You come out with your shoulders hunched. You're alert, anxious, y'understand. You got your gun out like this. You grab the bag in the other hand like this. See? You back out to here. You turn. You make the jump to that box. You leap from the box into your saddle. You fan it down the street. . . . Don't worry about the horse; we'll keep him moving. And, for God's sake, don't look back. Now let's try it."

Luther made a supreme effort to get it

right. He came out, shoulders hunched, every muscle in his body tense.

"That's it!" Lefty Keenan called through his megaphone. "Keep on moving!"

LUTHER still had several steps to take before he made his leap when Vic broke in on him.

"Now you're doing the very thing I told you not to do!" he raged. "I told you to keep your back to this camera, didn't I? Why are you turning like that? Can't you remember you're only doubling this part?" He reached out to grab Luther's arm, intending to jerk him around into the position he wanted. Something in the cold gray depths of the man's eyes made him change his mind. "Please, Stillings," he said, suddenly humble, "try to get it this time. You came out swell then."

They ran through it once more.

"Okay," Lefty called. "We'll shoot it. Everybody in their places. Get ready for sound." He blew his whistle a moment later and called for the cameras to start grinding.

Luther came out dramatically, made his leap and, luck being with him, caught his stirrups as he settled into the saddle. The horse, a double, too, painted to resemble the ancient and original Toby, reared instantly. As the animal came down, Vic and some of the crew, armed with air guns, opened fire. The stinging lead pellets lent wings to desire and man and beast plunged madly down the street.

"Cut!" Keenan shouted.

"How was it, Mr. Keenan?" Vic asked.

"It was swell," said the all-highest. It became Vic Rosemon's duty to relay the verdict to actors, technicians and crew by way of an order: "Everybody down to the hotel set at the corner!"

Great activity followed. Electricians kicked off the current. The sound truck lumbered away. Extras and principals followed it. Reflectors were tossed into the camera car. Presently the Last Chance saloon was deserted and still.

Luther rode up to find Bonnie waiting for him. She was very boyish-looking in her snug-fitting jodhpurs. Riding breeches of that cut certainly would have been a novelty in Pima County in 1885; but Western pictures are like that.

"You certainly forked that bronc, cowboy!" she exclaimed encouragingly.

"They can't beat you when they let you do your stuff. Remington couldn't have made that leap if his contract had depended on it."

It won a skeptical smile from Luther.

"I was terrible, and you know it, Ronnie," he said as he slid out of his saddle. "I might as well admit it; I don't fit into this at all. I sure know I can't stand much more of what they've been handin' out to me this afternoon."

Bonnie gave his arm a comradely pat. "I knew what you were thinking. I could see it written all over your face. I was afraid you'd take little Vic apart so completely we could never put him back together again."

"Reckon I was thinkin' somethin' to that effect," Luther admitted. "The afternoon ain't over yet, Bonnie."

"But you wouldn't, Luther—for my sake," she pleaded. "I know how hard it is. Don't forget I was just as green as you are only a few months back. I wanted to chuck it, too."

The tall man gave his Stetson a savage tug. "I wouldn't have blamed you if you had," he muttered. "I swear I don't see how you ever stuck it out. I know a lot of girls is envyin' you. Durin' the roundup at Pendleton, Fox Miller and Mabel and the others wouldn't talk about nothin' else but you bein' a star in Hollywood. All this stuff in the papers about you bein' the only girl ever to graduate from the rodeo ranks into the movies sounds mighty important, but now I'm here myself, I don't figure it means so much."

"It means a lot of money, Luther," Bonnie reminded him. "That's the only reason anyone stays in the pictures—the smart ones, I mean. You do all this because in just a little while you won't have to do any of it. Understand?"

"I reckon I do, if you mean that I need the money. But there's some things a man can't do even for money. At least I can't. When I was workin' around up in the Big Horn country I used to think it was pretty hard." He shook his head over that old memory. "Shucks, I never knew what hard work was until I began ridin' the rodeos. And then . . ."

"And then we came to Hollywood and went into the movies and found out what hard work really is," Bonnie teased. She was very fond of Luther. She had met him at the Cheyenne Frontier Days Cele-

bration three years back. It was her first appearance as a contestant in the big rodeos. He was already a star, having won the Association championship two years in succession. No man she had ever seen could do more with the buckers.

THEY had worked a hundred shows together since then. Luther did not have to remind her of those lean years and the hard knocks that are the common lot of all rodeo performers.

"I got a nasty fall this mornin'," he said as they perched themselves on the steps of the old hotel. The set had served under many aliases in countless Western pictures. According to the freshly painted sign above the rickety wooded awning it was now the Pima House. "But it ain't what I do so much as what I can't do that makes it hard," he went on soberly. "I don't like to have folks laughin' at me."

"Your turn will come!" She had never seen him so stern-looking. "You know, I sort of feel responsible for you; I wrote you to come. That old rodeo cry of 'Stay a long time, cowboy,' is ringing in my ears now. I'm expecting you to stay a long time, Luther. This is just a game here, and they pay you for playing it. Don't let it get under your skin."

"I can't help it," he murmured gloomily. "Lord knows the money you get ridin' the rodeos is poor enough, but you don't have to be ashamed of takin' it. Leastwise you ain't palmin' off a fake on folks. The idea of callin' this thing a Western picture! There ain't nothin' of the real West in it."

"Of course not, child! This is horse opera—pure and simple! The only thing Lefty Keenan knows about a ranch is that it's the place the roast beef comes from."

It was said lightly but it failed to win a smile from Luther. "I wasn't thinkin' so much about Keenan. Rosemon is the big tinhorn around here." His eyes narrowed ominously as he fastened them on the assistant director, dashing back and forth and fairly exuding importance as the cameramen and technicians prepared for the next scene. "That rat-eyed weasel actually thinks he knows all there is to be known about the West. Yesterday he tried to tell me how to ride a buckin' horse."

"Yes, Vic is gifted that way," Bonnie smiled, "but you can't start a war over that."

"I'd like to start one. He's walked on me more in the last few days than I ever let any man do in my life." He might have added that the only reason he had permitted it was on her account. "I can think of eighteen or twenty reasons why I don't like him."

He didn't state what the reasons were. If he had enumerated them, in the order of their importance in his mind, Bonnie would have been surprised, for no indignity Vic Rosemon had offered him could fill him with the fury he felt when he saw the man's air of possession with her.

"You seem to get along with him all right," he murmured, his tone unconsciously bitter.

There was an unspoken inference in his words that filled Bonnie with a pleasant excitement. She slipped an arm about him and gave him a little hug.

"My, you look fierce and blood-thirsty," she trilled. "Got to leave you now; another one of my big moments is at hand." She got to her feet lightly. "Just remember you have a chance to show them something real pretty in this shot. Do your durndest, Luther."

"I'll try, at least," he promised, his lips curling into a smile.

He gazed after her as she hurried to the corner in front of the hotel to take her stand for the scene. His gray eyes warmed. "The same old Bonnie," he told himself. The Important Pictures lot was suddenly less objectionable. "I'd be throwin' her down if I let this thing beat me. No matter what happens, I'm goin' to stick it out."

CHAPTER II

Flashing Hoofs

IF Luther had known what was running through Vic Rosemon's mind at the moment he would not have felt so sanguine about his ability to stick it out. Busy as Vic was, and he was an indefatigable worker, he had not failed to notice how Bonnie had lingered behind for Luther; nor had the hug she gave him and her evident interest in the tall man escaped his jealous eyes.

"I'll make the big stiff so sick of pictures he'll have to do a fade-out," he promised himself. Just what new form of torture was to bring this about, Vic could not have said at the moment; but his ingenuity was great. Luther Stillings would

not be the first man he had put the skids under.

Vic was master of the unbeatable combination that brings success in Hollywood: he liked himself; he worked hard; more important still, he knew with uncanny nicety whom to fawn on and whom to ride over rough-shod. He had risen from the rank of prop boy to his present exalted station; and it was only the beginning, in his mind. Lefty Keenan had grown fat and lazy. Vic made a great gesture of always referring to him, but secretly he despised Lefty and actually exercised as much authority in the Tom Remington unit as Nat Zabriskie, the supervisor of Important's Westerns.

It was really Zabriskie, who had seen Bonnie at the Salinas rodeo, who was responsible for her being on the Important lot; but Vic had made the tests of her, and from that moment on he had applied himself industriously to driving home the impression that it was he who had got the great "break" for her.

Having marked her for his own he raised the deadline against other prowling males of the motion-picture jungle by the simple expedient of heaping such favors on her as she would accept and being seen with her repeatedly in Henry's and other public places to which his social status in the film world admitted him.

The weeks had slipped by, and he found himself making very little progress with Bonnie. But that did not dismay him, for Vic was one of those Little Napoleons who never admit defeat, and he excused her aloofness by telling himself that she was still afraid of Hollywood and the pictures.

Hopelessly infatuated he had gone on with faith unabated in his ultimate success until Luther Stillings had arrived in Hollywood. For a week now he had been stumbling over him every time he tried to speak to Bonnie. And yet, to please her, he had pulled the strings that placed Luther on the Important lot. It filled him with a seething fury just to recall the fact. Three long and bitter days he had been cursing himself for a fool for ever having listened to her. And not for any reason connected with the making of motion-pictures. He had seen enough to convince him that Bonnie's affectionate regard for Luther could not be dismissed on the score of friendship.

The affecting little scene on the steps of the hotel was by way of being the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back with Vic Rosemon. His sallow face was livid with wrath as he dressed the street and hotel porch with extras.

"Come on, scram outa here!" he growled at Luther. "These steps are in this shot. And get that horse outa here! You've been around here long enough to know we're making a picture. Or maybe you don't at that," he added contemptuously.

Luther's promise to see the thing through almost went for naught. His jaws clenched and he did not trust himself to speak for a moment.

"I didn't know I was in the way," he got out finally. "Just what am I to do in this scene?"

"I'll tell you what to do when I get around to it," Vic snapped at him. "You can get that horse now and get across the street until you're wanted."

Jeff Kelso, who had doubled for Remington until he had been demoted to the rank of ordinary extra to make room for Luther, was on the hotel steps. He snickered offensively as his successor started across the street. Luther could feel his ears flaming.

The shot about to be filmed was the great runaway stage-coach scene, one of those typical Keenan touches that made the exhibitors ask for more. It seemed that it was noon in Pima City. The good citizens of the little frontier town are gathering about the hotel to greet the arrival of the stage-coach, when a shrill cry of danger arises from the assembled throng. The thundering hoofs of plunging horses ring out. Suddenly from around the corner beyond the hotel, the stage-coach careens into view, the dead driver killed by an outlaw bullet, rolls about crazily on the box. True to the best traditions of his calling, he has sold his life in order to save the gold shipment that will keep Bonnie's father from ruin.

The crowd scrambles to safety as the maddened horses plunge down the main street. Suddenly a woman screams. It is Bonnie. Her little sister, a child of five, has been playing about the water-trough in front of the hotel. She is in the very path of the foam-flecked horses. It seems that nothing can save her. Bonnie tries to rush to her side, but strong arms hold her back knowing her sacrifice would be in vain. As she struggles with them, the young sheriff of Pima County dashes into view. Riding

like a demon, he flashes across the path of the oncoming horses, bends low in his saddle, and catching the little tot in his strong arms, bears her off to safety.

IT was a master scene. Most of it had been shot days ago. The rescue and a comedy relief touch were all that remained to be perpetuated on celluloid.

After repeated conferences between Lefty and Vic, the stage-coach dashed into view, the expert driver, concealed in the body of the coach, wheeled his horses, dripping soap lather, down the main street at breakneck speed. He repeated the performance half-a-dozen times until he had the timing perfected.

Lefty spent a few minutes with Bonnie and the child. At last he was ready for Luther.

"All right, Stillings!" Vic called out. "Mr. Keenan wants to talk to you."

Luther approached the throne. Lefty told him what he wanted.

"This ought to be right up your alley," he ran on. "Just remember the child isn't in any real danger. We can always turn that team. You'll have twice as much time as you need to get in the clear. We'll break this shot up and put the thrill in when we get it in the cutting-room."

Lefty could not have shown even Remington greater consideration. Luther could not understand it. Vic Rosemon did, however. He knew Lefty had no intention of breaking up the shot. He didn't put his brand of realism into pictures that way. The child would be in danger, and so would Stillings. Lefty was only being cunning about it as the best way of avoiding an accident. He didn't want Luther riding into the scene nervous and overanxious.

"I want you to give me a good ride and a clean pick-up, Stillings," he said. "I know you can do it. Don't worry about the stage-coach after you pass it. The cameras stay on you. Just before you get to the corner pull your horse up in the air. Make him dance a little. We'll cut you as you bring him down." He turned to Rosemon. "Now you walk through it with him, Vic. Let him make the pick-up once or twice. We won't bring the stage-coach through until we shoot."

The immediate effect of Lefty's tactics was to give Luther a measure of confidence in himself. He had been treated civilly, even praised indirectly, and he was prepared to reward Keenan with a slashing ride.

The sullenness left his face. Vic noticed the change in him as they walked back to Luther's pony. His thin lips twisted into a cruel smile. "Thinks he's got the bull by the tail now," he thought. "I'll take that out of him in a hurry."

He realized that here was an opportunity to cripple Stillings and rid himself of him forever. He proposed to make the most of it. Vicious beyond belief, he set out deliberately not only to nullify the feeling Lefty had installed in Luther, but to so infuriate him that he would bungle the pick-up and be run down.

"You don't want to gum this up, Stillings," he grumbled as he showed him the angle at which he was to ride past the cameras. They were out of earshot of the others. "The life of that kid is in your hands," he went on virtuously. "Don't let anybody kid you that this shot isn't dangerous. You make a bloomer and you'll find yourself tangled up under that team."

Luther glanced at him sharply. "But Mr. Keenan said—"

"I know what he said," Vic cut him off. "He thinks you'd lose your nerve and get so over-anxious you'd be sure to pull an accident if he warned you. You've been falling all over yourself all day long."

"Then why are you tellin' me?"

Vic was not prepared for such directness, but he managed to dissemble his surprise. "I'm telling you because I think a guy ought to know what he's going up against. When you get in there nobody's going to be able to help you; you'll have to use your own nut. That ten-horse team is coming through. This shot won't be broken up unless you break it."

Luther's face was suddenly hard and grim. "I wondered why he was so nice about it," he muttered tensely as he climbed into his saddle.

"If you feel anything coming up on you, or you think you haven't got the bowels for this, Stillings, now is the time to say so," Vic drove on.

"In other words, unless I got a streak of yellow in me I'll go through with it," Luther whipped out fiercely.

"I wouldn't put it that way. . . ."

"Not as plain as that, you mean. Listen, Rosemon, does that little girl's mother know this is apt to be dangerous?"

"It won't be if you keep your head. That's what I've been trying to tell you," he insisted craftily. "Your getting excited this way is all that's worrying me'"

"That's all that's worryin' you, eh?" Luther sneered, unable to hide his unspeakable contempt for the man. "Suppose we get started," he whipped out fiercely. "Let's get this over with."

Vic permitted himself a saturnine smile. He was succeeding easier than he had figured. Before another ten minutes had passed he had Luther in a white-faced fury by heckling him continually and purposely confusing him in his instructions. They ran through the pick-up. Vic let him make it two or three times before he warned him against getting in between the child and the cameras.

They tried it again; three or four times more.

Vic noted with satisfaction that the horse was becoming fractious; that the child was tiring. He hurried up the street to where Luther was waiting.

"Well, that was better," he acknowledged stonily. "We'll try it once or twice more. . . ."

"No we won't," Luther flamed. "If you want an accident you're goin' about it the right way. The little girl is gettin' tired and scared. I almost missed her that time."

Vic bristled with well-feigned indignation, but his round little eyes were beady. "You'll do what you're told, Stillings. You're not giving any orders. You seem to forget you're only an extra."

"Yeah, I'm only an extra," Luther agreed, "but as far as I'm concerned you can shoot this scene now or never."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it I'll tell Mr. Keenan," Vic foolishly tried to bluff. He had no intention of doing anything of the sort. He preferred to win another way.

"Suppose I save you the trouble," Luther volunteered. "I've got a couple of things to say to him. He might appreciate your tippin' me off to this little game."

Vic laughed, as though he found the threat very amusing, but his thin lips twitched nervously.

"There you go," he exclaimed patronizingly, "blowing up just as I was afraid you would. I only wanted you to get this thing right so you could play it safe. If you think you're all set, we'll shoot it."

IT was Luther's turn to laugh. "So you can be made to crawl when the goin' gets rough, can't you? I figured you could. . . . You tell Keenan I'm ready."

With murder in his heart, Vic Rosemon turned his back on Luther and hurried to confer with Lefty. Presently the order to get ready was given. An assistant camera man held up a little blackboard with the scene number on it. The cameras began to grind.

Around the corner came the ten-horse team, the old stage-coach almost turning over as the horses turned too sharply. It was time for Vic to give the agreed signal to Luther, but he waited until the team had straightened itself out and was plunging ahead before he waved his flag.

Luther was ready. A dreadful calm rested on him. He took it for granted that this was his last day on the Important lot, but he had made Vic crawl, and the knowledge had acted as a powerful sedative on his tangled nerves.

"My last ride, and I'll make it a good one," he promised himself as he raked his pony with the spurs.

In ten yards he had pulled the animal into headlong flight. It was only a second or two before the cameras picked him up. The team was coming on too, cutting down the distance between the leaders and the child with incredible speed.

Luther's jaws locked; it was going to be even closer than he had figured. His legs tightened about the pony. In a moment he would be making the pick-up; he'd have the little tot in his arms. Her face was turned toward him. The thundering hoofs of the galloping horses, the wild cries of the extras, had filled her with horror—not the trance-like fear that the script asked of her; she wanted to run, to try to save herself.

It was too late for that. Her safety depended on being ready for Luther; but, with a groan of agony, he saw her turn to flee. In some way he swung his pony around her, bent low and clutched her safely in the crook of his right arm.

As he straightened up the leaders were not fifteen yards away. He was to pass to the right of the team. He didn't seem to have a chance. The gasp of fear that was wrung from the watching extras and actors was not born of any histrionic ability. They expected to see the man and child crushed to death.

But Luther rose in his stirrups and snatched off his sombrero. With a shrill "Ee-yah!" he slapped it almost in the faces of the leaders. They reared and piled up on the horses in back of them.

It meant only a few feet—and for only a split second—but it was enough. There was an opening! He flashed around the threshing team and up the street. The rest was child's play for him.

He did not hear Lefty's cry to cut. It was lost in the gasp of relief and the succeeding round of applause that rang out. Keenan beamed on the crowd, to Vic Rosemon's disgust, and encouraged the demonstration. He knew he had something in the cans now that would make the customers hold on to their seats. The moment had been a tense one for him. He mopped his round, perspiring face.

Rosemon could not understand even now how Luther had escaped being run down. He had not only come through untouched, but he was in a fair way of definitely establishing himself as a great asset in Lefty Keenan's mind. Certainly he was a hero to Bonnie Williams at the moment.

Hating him as he had never hated anyone, Vic blew his whistle and started to give the order to get ready for the one scene that remained to be shot. Lefty stopped him. Luther was riding back with the little girl on his saddle bow.

"Great work, Stillings!" Keenan called out as Luther pulled up beside the platform and put the child down. "You used your head all the way. I congratulate you!"

Vic could have killed him with pleasure for his enthusiasm. To his chagrin, he saw Lefty put out his hand.

But Luther refused to see it. His gray eyes found Keenan's and bored holes into him. Lefty knew what was on his mind. He flushed.

"You—saved me the trouble of breaking up that shot, Stillings . . ."

"Yeah," Luther answered tonelessly, "we just got by, didn't we?"

"Been your fault if you hadn't," Rosemon sneered. "You lost a lot of time getting started."

Luther clamped a hand on Vic's shoulder. Rosemon winced as the tall man's fingers sunk into his soft flesh.

"It certainly was a late start," said Luther. He made Vic meet his eyes. "Maybe both of us was just a mite slow."

CHAPTER III

Lonesome Land

WITH the stage-coach shot out of the way, the day was over for all but three or four extras. Even Lefty departed for his bungalow on directors' row, leaving Vic to finish up. The comedy shot would be cut down to only a flash in the assembled picture, and Rosemon was capable of directing it as well as he.

It was a trite bit. Three or four extras were to be seated on the edge of the water-trough when the stage-coach came down the street. In their haste to get out of danger they were to throw themselves backward and get a ducking in the trough.

Now that he was in command, Vic barked his orders to the crew and cameramen as though he were about to film the fall of Rome. Out of the corner of his eyes he caught a flash of Bonnie, lingering to congratulate Luther.

"I hope she sticks around a while," he gloated. "I'll give her a laugh!"

He hurried to get ready to shoot. Bonnie and Luther were still talking and not unaware of what was going on at the water-trough. Vic sensed it and began to find fault with one of the extras. Suddenly he whirled and called to Luther.

"Come on, Stillings, I can use you in this shot. Get that shirt and gun-belt off. Mr. Keenan thinks you're the goods, so I'll give you a chance to look the cameras right in the eye."

Bonnie surmised his purpose instantly. She said nothing to Luther, but as he got out of his Tom Remington togs, she spoke to Vic.

"You're making a mistake, Vic," she said pointedly. "Better use someone else; you're playing with dynamite."

"I'm directing a scene," he flared back, almost as angry with her as with Luther. "Take that man's place on the end, Stillings. Remember, you fellows are listening to Jeff. You don't see the stage-coach until it's almost on top of you. Then you scramble back. All I want you to do is look scared."

He called Jeff Kelso aside and gave him a whispered instruction.

Knowing what was in the wind, Bonnie went to her dressing-room at once that Luther might be spared the humiliation of having her witness the indignity Vic was

about to visit on him. Rosemon saw her leave. He would have called her back if he had dared.

Fifteen minutes later he was ready to shoot. He gave the order, and the ten-horse team raced down the street. Suddenly Jeff Kelso gave the warning cry. He threw out his arm, and when he fell back, Luther and another extra toppled over into the water with him.

That made it a day. Dripping wet, Luther scrambled out of the trough. From his perch on the camera platform, Vic watched him furtively, ready to call for help if Luther came after him.

The expected outburst did not materialize, however. Luther understood why he had been singled out for this bit of horseplay, and, although he was filled with blistering indignation, he did not propose to add to Vic's pleasure by showing it. Pretending he believed it to be all in the day's work, he followed Kelso and the others to the extra men's dressing-room.

The bits of conversation that floated his way as he wrung the water from his clothing were not calculated to improve his peace of mind. His refusal to let them draw his fire emboldened them. Presently Jeff Kelso found the game too tame. He sauntered over to Luther.

"You won't crack, Stillings, but I know you're all burnt up," he said. "It's a shame to make a man who's a trick rider and doublin' for the star do a flop in a comedy shot," he added with well-feigned sympathy. "You got my job and I suppose I ought to be sore at you, but I ain't. You're on the spot, and I feel sorry for you."

"You do, eh?" Luther queried skeptically. Jeff's profession of friendship came too late to be believable.

"I sure do," he went on, ignoring the danger signals in Luther's eyes. "I know why you got my job. Vic had to give it to you when Bonnie Williams asked him for it. You weren't kiddin' yourself that you got it on your reputation, were you?"

"I sorta had that idea," Luther drawled. The velvety quality in his voice would have been taken as a warning by those who knew him better. Bonnie had taken him in to see Nat Zabriskie. Two days later he had been engaged. He had no reason to suspect that Vic had in any way influenced the supervisor's decision.

"That's rich!" Jeff laughed. "It's about time you woke up, Stillings. Bonnie Williams is in a position to get anything she asks of Vic. If . . ."

"Wait a minute," Luther murmured tensely. "I don't like the way you say that, Jeff."

"I don't care whether you do or not," Kelso went on recklessly. "She's his girl, and you know it. She was satisfied to get you the job, but now she rubs you in Vic's nose; no wonder he's sore at you—I'd be that way too if a dame tried to two-time me. I don't know what she does for the favors she gets . . ."

Jeff got no further. Luther's fist caught him across the mouth. Kelso's head went back and his eyes glazed. He was out cold when he hit the floor.

Luther stared at him dully for a moment. The others in the room had run up. Most of them were Jeff's friends, but they had nothing to say. A glass full of water stood on the shelf they used for a make-up table. Luther picked it up and dashed its contents in Jeff's face. He stirred and then sat up, blinking his eyes. His mouth was torn.

"Come on, climb up on your legs now and tell these boys you're a rat," Luther commanded. He gave emphasis to his words by wrapping his fingers in the collar of Jeff's shirt and yanking him to his feet. "Say it," he whipped out fiercely.

Jeff obliged. Luther gave him a slap across the face with the flat of his hand and started for the door. His only thought was to get off the Important lot as quickly as he could. He told himself he never wanted to see it again.

HE found the Western street peopled with little groups of extras hurrying toward the main gate at the front of the lot. They glanced at him pityingly, he thought. Filled with bitterness, he walked on.

He had gone only a few yards when a car rolled into view. As it passed him he saw Vic Rosemon at the wheel.

Vic stopped in front of the old 'dobe church. The dressing-rooms for the principals in Important's Westerns were located in back of the church. Luther surmised he had come for Bonnie.

The sight of him made Luther see red. Jeff had said enough not only to make him realize why he had been heckled so unmercifully but to convince him that Vic

had purposely delayed giving the signal in the stage-coach shot, in the hope that he would be run down and crippled.

Luther told himself he might have forgiven him that, but he could not forgive his inspiring such talk about Bonnie as Jeff had echoed.

Common sense warned Luther Stillings nothing was to be gained by giving Vic a whipping.

"You can't draw poison out of a rattler that way," he thought. To shame him, to make him ridiculous in the eyes of Hollywood, to prick the bubble of his conceit would be more to the point.

Some premonition of disaster must have come to Vic, for as Luther bore down on him he suddenly decided to run in and have a word with Remington. Luther was almost abreast of the car by now, but all might have been well with Vic if he had let him pass. Instead, he tried to brush by with his usual arrogance.

It was too much for Luther. Something snapped in him and he reached out and caught the assistant director by the ear. Vic squealed with pain as Luther spun him around.

"Let go of me, you big bully!" he whined.

"So, I'm a bully now, eh?" Luther rasped, holding him off at arm's length. "It's a pleasure to see you squirm, you little insect. You've been walkin' over people so long you think you've a God-given right to do it."

A crowd gathered, as is usually the case at such moments. Vic sent out a dumb appeal for help, but no one rushed to his assistance.

"I'll have you arrested if you lay a hand on me!" he threatened.

"Don't worry, I'm not goin' to give you the lickin' you deserve," Luther assured him. "I'm only goin' to put you in your place for once. I know it won't have any permanent effect, but it may slow you up a little on dirtyin' up decent folks' reputations."

Vic tried to break away as Luther marched him over to the water-trough in front of the old hotel set.

"I'll get you for this, Stillings!" he shrieked.

"Like you tried to get me to-day, eh? That's enough out of you!"

He let go of Vic's ear, and, catching him around the middle, lifted him off the ground and tossed him headlong into the trough.

Vic came up gasping, all the conceit knocked out of him for the moment. The crowd twittered guardedly; their jobs hung in the balance.

Luther felt somebody clutch his arm. It was Bonnie. Her face was white. Without a word she led him away.

"Why did you do it, Luther?" she groaned when they had left the crowd behind. "I heard what you did to Jeff Kelso, and now this—you know you're through, don't you? You'll never get another day's work on this lot."

Luther scowled darkly. "Did you hear what Jeff said to me?" he got out miserably.

Bonnie nodded.

"I couldn't stand for that. I know I've thrown you down, but I couldn't play it any other way."

"Your foolish pride," she sighed, as unhappy as he. "I didn't want you to know—but I did ask Vic to help you get the job."

"You did?" Luther gasped. "Then what Jeff said was true . . ."

"Not what you're thinking now." She tried to catch his arm. "Please . . . won't you believe me? It meant so much to me—getting you started."

"It must have meant a great deal," he muttered bleakly. ". . . Makin' a fool out of me. Makin' me think they'd just been waitin' for me to show up."

They reached the gate, Bonnie's eyes were misty.

"My car is over in the parking space," she murmured tremulously. "Let me ride you into town, Luther. I want to talk to you."

"No," he answered stonily, his face bloodless. "I'll take the bus."

Hours later, his head splitting, Luther sat on the edge of his bed staring with unseeing eyes at the glowing city below. A million lights, a thousand electric signs, all calling one to gaiety and forgetfulness. Distant laughter reached him; the cacophony of countless radios.

Their only effect on him was to fill him with loneliness such as he had never known.

"Nothin' to keep me here now," he brooded. "I can roll my blankets and move along."

CHAPTER IV

Ridin' Fool!

LUTHER did not leave Hollywood. For a day or two he hardly stirred from his room. Bonnie telephoned, but he told his landlady to say he was out. He did not want to speak to her or see her. Nor could he bring himself to quit town and cut himself off from her completely. He found a bitter sort of happiness in knowing the same town sheltered them both.

He had drawn his pay from Important and he had some other money. However, he began to see that when everything is going out and nothing coming in that a little nest egg soon dwindles. Before long, he was spending the greater part of the day lounging around the "water-hole" at the corner of Cahuenga and Hollywood Boulevard. Other ex-cowboys, like himself, drawn to Hollywood by the tales of big money, idled the hours away there, too.

His name was on file at the Central Casting Bureau. No calls for his services came from there. Only one or two of the big companies were making Westerns. He began to haunt the Tec-Art lot and the casting offices of other independent producers. The sign: NO CASTING TODAY, always greeted him.

The calls from Bonnie ceased. He saw her once. She was really looking for him. He felt shabby and down at the heels. In a panic, he fled.

The rodeo season was still weeks away. He counted his cash and mentally reserved enough for his entrance money.

Misery loves company, and nowhere is it as true as in the city of the flickers. It brought Luther and Flash Carter together again. They had known each other for years. Flash was fat and soft now. He once had won fame as a bulldogger. His knowledge of Hollywood was great.

He it was who first brought Luther the news that Important was going to make a super-Western; a million-dollar frontier epic that would be the biggest thing of its kind the talkies had attempted. Lefty Keenan was to direct it, and prominent in the all-star cast were Bonnie and Tom Remington.

Around the "water-hole" it was news that would have dwarfed in importance the burning of New York. It meant work.

"They're goin' up to Utah to shoot it," Flash informed Luther. "Price Canyon this time, our kind of country. They'll be on location at least five weeks."

It became the great subject of conversation and speculation among those with whom Luther consorted. As the days passed, this one and that reported they had been engaged. Men who had been hanging around the corner for weeks began to disappear. Luther understood that they were busily preparing for the getaway.

The guns of Important's publicity department began to roar. Luther read about the production plans in every newspaper that fell into his hands. It was not easy for him to feign indifference in the face of all the excitement and enthusiasm about him. And yet he managed it some way; slapping his acquaintances on the back and wishing them luck.

A few, Flash Carter among them, had not yet been taken into the fold. They were hopeful; they had promises, and were going to see Vic "tomorrow." Luther did not have to advance such excuses, at least; he was beyond the pale. He did not have to wait outside the Important casting-office, or lie in wait for a precious word with Vic Rosemon.

One evening he and Flash sat down to a bowl of chili in Mexicali Pete's little hole-in-the-wall, Luther playing host. Again Flash was the bearer of important news. In some mysterious way he had learned that "Under Western Skies" was to be Bonnie's last picture for Important.

Luther was amazed. "You hear a lot of talk in this town," he said.

"This is on the level," Flash insisted. "They offered her a new contract and she refused to sign it."

"Why should she do anythin' like that?" Luther demanded anxiously. "She can't do as well anywhere else; they make the big pictures." Pete's chili had suddenly lost its savor.

"I don't know what she's got on her mind," Flash declared weightily, "but, somehow, I kinda figure you may have somethin' to do with it."

"Me?" Luther grunted incredulously as he tossed off the last of his coffee.

"Yeah. It may be her way of tryin' to show you there wasn't anythin' to all that talk about her bein' Vic's girl." Luther stiffened, but it did not deter Flash. "That rumor started with Vic himself. But

shucks, there's a lot of talk like that goin' on around this tradin'-post. They don't come any finer than Bonnie. But for her I wouldn't have been eatin' these past few weeks."

This was news to Luther.

"Have you been talkin' to her about me?" he demanded brusquely.

"Why, no," Flash replied. It was hardly the truth, but he felt the lie justified. "You can do your own talkin'. You're pretty hot-headed, Luther; if you don't mind my sayin' it, I don't think you've been treatin' her just right."

Luther's face flamed. "I made her trouble enough," he got out jerkily. "I figure the best thing I can do is to keep out of her way. You know, Flash, I don't believe any of that talk. I been here long enough to pick up that much."

"Hunh!" Flash snorted. "I'll say you've taken a fine way of showin' it! When anybody I want to see keeps out of my way I figure they got somethin' on their mind; and I'll bet that's what Bonnie thinks, too. It's easy to understand why she gave you that song and dance about Zabriskie bein' so glad to get you. She knew you'd been drawin' a lot of water around the rodeos, and that it would set you down pretty hard if you found out you were just an unknown maverick on the movie range. I guess you've tumbled to that by now."

Luther communed with himself and said nothing. He seemed to have made a terrible mess of everything.

"You ought to see Bonnie before she goes on location," Flash suggested.

"Oh, I'll see her sometime," Luther promised indefinitely. He was anxious to be alone. "I'll be pullin' out myself in a week or two now."

ALTHOUGH longing desperately to see Bonnie, he could not bring himself to look her up. He decided it would be better to write her a letter. He started several but got nowhere.

The following day Flash Carter joined the ranks of those who were going to Utah with the company. After that Luther spent less and less time around the "water-hole." Nor did he make the rounds of the studios. To be looking for work when Important had seemingly engaged every cowboy in town made it a little too obvious that he must be utterly undesirable.

Without his being in any way aware of it, Lefty Keenan took the program picture in which Luther had doubled for Remington over to Glendale for a routine preview. Zabriskie, Vic and three or four others went over with him. They gathered in the lobby after the picture had been run.

"It clicked!" Nat declared enthusiastically. "That stage-coach stuff is immense. What a riding fool that Stillings is!"

"Yeah, he's okay," Lefty agreed.

The following morning he called Vic into his bungalow. Vic's little world had had a laugh at his expense and quickly forgotten the incident. It still burned painfully in his mind, however. Bonnie had turned against him, too, avoiding him whenever possible and repelling his advances. He placed it all at Luther's door and hated him accordingly, going to fantastic lengths to close the gates of other studios against him in order that the futility of trying to earn a living in Hollywood must dawn on him eventually and send him back to the life from which he had come.

Nat Zabriskie's praise of Luther the previous evening, coupled with Lefty's ready concurrence, had thoroughly disturbed Vic, and, as he entered Keenan's bungalow, he half suspected why he had been summoned there.

"Vic, I want you to get hold of Stillings," Lefty announced without preamble of any sort.

Vic could not conceal his chagrin, even though he had tried to prepare himself for something of the sort. "Why—I thought we were all set, Lefty," he exclaimed irascibly. "We don't really need him. . . .

"Well, we'll take him along, just in case. Have him come in to see me."

Vic started to leave, his face bloodless. Lefty called him back.

"Better forget the trouble you had with him, Vic," he suggested condescendingly. "Just remember we're making pictures."

Vic took it as a slap in the face. He bustled out of the office, burning with indignation. For an insane moment or two he actually considered chucking his job and walking off the lot rather than suffer the ignominy of seeing Luther Stillings restored to grace.

But he was too cautious and cagy to consider anything of the sort for long. He settled down at his own desk to waste an hour trying to discover some artifice by which he might keep Luther off the lot,

There was little he wouldn't have done. But nothing suggested itself. An order from Lefty—when it was as definite as this—was an order. With the keenest agony, Vic reached for the telephone and called Luther's number.

He was amazed and delighted to learn that Luther had moved to cheaper quarters, leaving no forwarding address. He tried the Central Casting office, the Cowboys' Association, without eliciting any clue to his whereabouts. He spoke to Jeff Kelso, Flash Carter, and three or four others; all said they had not seen Luther in almost a week.

Vic began to glow within. Perhaps Luther had left town. "That would be a break," he mused with growing satisfaction. He thought of Bonnie; she might know where to find him, even though they had not been seen together in weeks. Unlikely as it seemed, it tempered his elation.

Although he was reluctant to speak to Bonnie about Luther, he was so anxious to learn what she knew that he left his office hurriedly in search of her. She had been on the lot that morning. Now that he wanted to find her, she was not to be located. He was still looking for her when Lefty summoned him a second time.

Vic found Nat Zabriskie conferring with Keenan.

"Did you get in touch with him?" Lefty asked.

Vic reported his failure. "I haven't spoken to Miss Williams yet," he informed them.

"Well, good God, don't!" Nat snapped. "Just suppose you forget this."

Vic began to put two and two together when he found himself outside. Nat Zabriskie had a reputation for being somewhat of an adept at killing two birds with one stone.

"I could tell him what he's got on his mind," Vic seethed. "He's made Lefty think he needs Stillings, but what he's really after is a bait to keep Bonnie on this lot."

It was a shrewd guess.

LEFTY came into town to lunch at the Brown Derby. Later he spent half an hour of his precious time making guarded inquiries concerning Luther at the "water-hole." Luther had been seen that morning, but no one knew where he was to be found.

Back on the lot, Lefty telephoned a friend who had offices in the Security Bank building. That evening an ad appeared in the "Help Wanted" column of the Hollywood *Citizen*.

> WANTED: Experienced man to care for saddle stock. Call eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. Suite C, Security Bank building.

The ad bore fruit. A telephone call got Lefty to the scene in a hurry. He was just entering the building—or so he pretended—when Luther came out.

"Well, Stillings, this is a surprise!" he exclaimed heartily. "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Oh, I've been around," Luther answered awkwardly. "Gettin' ready to leave town."

"Sorry to hear that. We previewed the picture the other evening."

"How d'd it turn out?" Luther asked with a flash of interest.

"Fine! I certainly was pleased with what you did. By the way—maybe you'd like to see it before you leave."

"I don't want to bother you—"

"No bother," Lefty assured him. "I'll be running it again this afternoon. Come out about four o'clock. I'll leave word at the front office to send you back."

Luther was still tenderfoot enough to see nothing unusual in a director's deigning to show a picture to an extra. Had he known his movies better he might have wondered.

Four o'clock found him in a projection room with Lefty. Nat Zabriskie managed to drop in too. He was strangely affable.

"You certainly are a riding fool, Stillings," he exclaimed when the picture had been run off. "I'm expecting some big things of you in this next one."

Luther looked from him to Lefty in frank amazement. "Must be some mistake, Mr. Zabriskie," he managed to say. "This is the first I've heard about me makin' any more pictures for you folks."

It was now Nat's turn to register surprise. "Why, I thought you and Mr. Keenan had talked that all over."

"Why, no," Lefty murmured apologetically. "I didn't know just how far you wanted me to go. I certainly want Stillings with us. . . ."

Nat rubbed his plump chin. "Suppose

we step over to my office and see if we can get together."

Luther began to feel a little dizzy.

"Now I might as well put my cards on the table," Nat began when he had seated himself at his big mahogany desk. "You know, I suppose, that this next picture will be Miss Williams' last for us."

"I—I heard that was the case," Luther admitted. A troubled look swept over his face suddenly. "You said somethin' about wantin' me back here. . . . Does Miss Williams know about it?"

"Well, hardly!" Nat laughed. "Things are a little bit strained between Miss Williams and me. We've done a lot for her, but she's got other plans now." He toyed with some papers for a moment. "I want you to understand that what I'm about to say is strictly confidential. We're going to go on making Westerns. We can get along without Miss Williams. This type of picture we've been making is about through anyhow. I am going right ahead with my plans to make a new type of Western—more riding and more of the real West. That's where I figure you might be worth a great deal to us."

"That's my thought," Lefty agreed. "This business is like a ferris wheel. Some people are always moving to the top and others are sliding down into the discard."

He didn't mention Bonnie, but the inference was plain. Luther's face became a stony mask. When Nat suggested that they would be willing to offer him a modest contract, and mentioned the sum they would pay, Luther said yes. His answer would have been the same at half the price. Bonnie's future was menaced and he knew it was his duty to be near her, to advise and warn her of her danger.

"I'll have the contract ready tomorrow," Nat said finally. "We are leaving Sunday evening at 6:15 on the Santa Fe. You better see about your wardrobe."

"I'll see about that," Lefty said.

They shook hands with him by way of dismissal.

Nat chuckled when the door had closed on Luther.

"He's just busting to tell Bonnie what we're going to do to her," he said.

"She'll listen to him, too."

"Of course she will," Lefty agreed. "I get a top hand and you get a signed contract. By all the rules of procedure, that calls for a drink."

CHAPTER V

Chicken-Hearted!

WITH almost military dispatch and discipline the big company established itself amid the scenic wonders of Price Canyon. It was no easy undertaking, housing and providing sustenance for one hundred and fifty men and women, transporting tons of equipment and fifty head of horses. Jack Cairns, head of the transportation department, and an ex-captain of U. S. Engineers, had charge of the job.

For twenty-four hours his big gray trucks ground the mountain road, from Pine City to the canyon itself, into dust. Tents went up, the commissary was established; sanitation arranged; six miles of telephone wire stretched and the camp connected with Hollywood. When night fell, the big, portable generators supplied current to flood lights, and the work went on. In Pine City, a plane arrived from California. It was there to rush each day's "take" back to the studio and provide Nat Zabriskie and other important executives with swift transportation back and forth as became necessary.

A landing field, of a sort, was ready for the plane. Contracts had been let for provisioning the camp. Meats, groceries, ice, hay began to move toward the canyon. A doctor and nurses made ready the first-aid station. Nothing had been overlooked. It was efficiency at the peak—the only efficiency the movies know.

It was a little incredible, but at eight o'clock the following morning Lefty was ready to shoot his first scene. Since motion-pictures are not filmed in the sequence of scenes as shown on the screen, it happened that the first shot was the closing one—a close-up of Bonnie and Remington, clasped in each other's arms, against a background of breath-taking beauty. In fact, Lefty spent the day on their scenes.

Bonnie was buoyant again. The special train that had borne the company to Utah had not been an hour out of Los Angeles before she and Luther levelled the barrier that had been keeping them apart. His concern for her had touched her, but wiser in the ways of the movies than he, she had taken Zabriskie's veiled threat with a grain of salt. On that score she said nothing, however; she had Luther back and she was happy.

Nat smiled to himself as he watched her work and prided himself on his strategy.

As for Luther, he was happy for the first time in weeks. Jeff Kelso glowered at him and Vic Rosemon was openly contemptuous, but they were only flea bites that failed to disturb him. He was in his own country, in a way. The smell of sagebrush was in his nostrils again. He could focus his eyes on distant horizons and fill his lungs with clean mountain air.

For two or three days he had nothing to do. When darkness fell it was pleasant to sit around a fire with Bonnie and have Flash strum his guitar and sing the old range songs.

In the privacy of his tent Vic could overhear their happy laughter. It was like a knife in his heart. He had never been so busy but he still found time to nurse his hatred of Luther Stillings.

Judging from the number of visitors always present, Pine City had declared a long holiday. They got in the way, but Zabriskie tolerated them because he never knew when he might have some favor to ask of the local big-wigs. The mayor; the judge of the local court; Link Bartlett, the grizzled sheriff of the county, were daily visitors. Merlin Smith, the district attorney—a dapper young man who took himself very seriously—came out too; but, unlike the mayor and old Link, the sheriff, who were as interested as boys at their first circus, Merlin had little use for what he termed "the movie people." His lack of enthusiasm did not deter the good folks of Pine City from arranging an old-fashioned barbecue and dance in honor of the company.

Vic was among the first to hear of it. He went off in search of Bonnie immediately, determined to make an issue of her going with him. He discovered her at her tent, ready to go to the commissary for supper. He found her as adorable as ever, even though she greeted him with marked coolness.

"I'm sorry," she said when he explained the reason for his presence, "but I have to say no."

"Still putting on the ice for me, Bonnie, eh?" he queried sulkily. "Someone else asked you?"

"Someone will," she answered bluntly, wishing he would go.

Vic did not intend to be put off so easily. "Isn't it about time you came to your senses, Bonnie? You ain't going to throw yourself away on that big tramp, are you? He doesn't mean a thing."

Bonnie had herself well in hand. "You'd be surprised how much he means," she said. "Maybe it would be better for both of us if we just let it go at that."

"Not a chance!" Vic exclaimed. "Gee, Bonnie, you know I'm crazy about you. . . ."

"I know there never could be anything between you and me—if that's what you really want to know." There was a note of finality in her tone that made Vic wince.

"You mean that?" he whined.

"I mean it, Vic—you ought to be able to understand that by this time."

"Huh!" Vic sneered, his mask lowered. "What a laugh that is! On the level, Bonnie, don't you know why Stillings was brought back? They got him here to work on you—not because they wanted him. That's Zabriskie's game!"

BONNIE smiled mirthlessly. "Very smart of Nat, I must say."

"You mean you knew it?" Vic exclaimed, a bit taken back.

"I suspected it—thanks to what Luther told me."

"So he blabbed it, eh? He couldn't be on the level with anybody!"

"Not your level, Vic—if that's what you're trying to say. You can't stampede me that way. If you have anything to say about Luther Stillings—why not say it to him?"

"I haven't anything to say to that guy," Vic snarled.

"Too chicken-hearted, eh?" Bonnie taunted.

"Yeah? Maybe my turn will come yet."

He turned on his heel and strode off in a towering rage.

Bonnie went to the dance with Luther and said nothing about Vic's invitation. Vic did not attend at all. In his insane rage he told himself he hated both of them.

He had the camp almost to himself. He stormed about for an hour, and when he was exhausted repaired to his tent and tried to find forgetfulness in working out the shooting schedule for the following day. But he could not keep his mind on it. Thoughts of Bonnie and Luther intruded until he gave up in disgust and prepared for bed. Sleep would not come. He tossed until he was frantic.

"This thing is driving me nuts." he groaned. He considered a dozen forms of revenge. They promised too little. In a cold sweat he recalled the stage-coach incident. "Maybe he wouldn't be so lucky another time," he brooded. Certainly there would be opportunities for something of the sort in the next few days.

"'Chicken-hearted,'" he raged. "I promised I'd get him, and I will!" He'd have to be cautious about it so that suspicion would never be directed at him, for he was not thinking of crippling Luther this time; it would be something more final than that.

It pulled him up with a start to realize that what he was considering was murder. He mulled it over in his warped mind for a long time. If he drew back at all it was only because of the danger to himself; no pang of conscience nor trace of pity for his supposed victim intruded to swerve him from his purpose.

He heard the others return from town; recognized Luther's low laughter and Bonnie's merry voice.

"Tomorrow or the following day," he promised himself. "I'll never have a better chance."

The decision brought him peace. He actually slept.

He awoke refreshed the following morning, his purpose unchanged. In the commissary he encountered Bonnie and Luther breakfasting together. He was prepared to find them there.

Their conversation died as he sat down at the long table with them. Vic actually found it possible to smile. "Eat hearty," he thought; "you may find yourself breakfasting in Hell tomorrow morning, Stillings."

CHAPTER VI

The Dark Angel Spreads Its Wings

THE day wore on. At noon Lefty spoke to Luther; he was ready to shoot the first of the spectacular shots in which Stillings was to double for the hero. In this instance he was to come off a cliff on horseback in what would prove in the finished picture to be the hero's desperate attempt to overtake Bonnie's abductors.

Luther had rehearsed the jump several times by himself. Tons of loose rock, that wind and frost had broken off the face of the cliff with the passing years slanted away to the creek below. It was impossible to land on it without setting great masses of it in motion. Some pieces would fly into the air and sail through space to land in the water. Dust clouds would go up and a terrifying din would ring up and down the canyon.

It looked far more dangerous than it really was. In rehearsing it, Luther had been more concerned about his horse than himself, for he could always throw himself out of the saddle and ride the rock-fall to the bottom. The pony was smart, though. As soon as it landed on the moving mass it sat down and coasted.

"I know you've been up there, Stillings, trying it out," Lefty continued. "You know what I want. How has it been going?"

"All right, I'd say," Luther replied.

"Well, if you feel that way about it, I'll start grinding on you when you go over the first time this afternoon. I'll have a pair of cameras up on top and another pair down below— How have you been finishing?"

"Just ridin' out of it. The rock moves slower and slower. Not much to it."

Keenan shook his head.

"Can't have you finish that way. Can't you throw that horse near the bottom and make it look as though he'd thrown you? I'd like to have you come down as though you'd been knocked out and roll over and over toward the water."

"I'll try it," Luther agreed skeptically, "but I don't know whether it can be done or not in that loose footin'."

FOR one reason and another, it was well after two o'clock before Lefty gave the word that sent Luther over the cliff. He was up on top; Vic was on the creek. A portable telephone permitted them to speak to each other.

Keenan's eyes glowed as he saw Luther sail off into his space, come down right side up and start his thrilling slide to the bottom. He felt it could not be improved on. He watched anxiously then for Luther to throw the horse and fall clear. He cursed in his disappointment as he saw Luther try in vain to throw the pony.

"What a break after a swell ride," he grumbled. He reached for the telephone to speak to Vic.

The scene meant nothing to Vic Rose-

mon; he had bigger fish to fry, and he was impatient to get on.

"We'll have to bring him back," said Lefty. "Stillings has got to throw that horse. See what he's got to say."

Vic conferred briefly with Luther.

"He says it can't be done," Vic reported. "He says the horse was so scared by the time they got down that it dropped on its hind quarters the moment he tried to toss him."

They discussed it at length.

"Of course, it can be done," said Vic. "We can plant a wire noose in the rocks and trip that nag: you know, the old hoolihan."

It was against the law to use wires on horses in California—though it was often done; just how it was regarded in Utah was something else again.

Lefty looked over the spectators for the day. Old Link Bartlett was present, but Merlin Smith, the district attorney, was fortunately absent. Lefty decided to take a chance.

A man was dispatched to camp for the wire. Luther understood now what they proposed doing.

"That's a dirty trick," he rasped. "Be a miracle if you don't break that pony's legs."

"That's up to you, ain't it?" Vic retorted. "You're riding him!"

When he got to the top, Luther complained to Lefty.

"Why should it hurt him?" Keenan scoffed. "May shake him up a bit, but it won't hurt him any more than it does to bulldog a steer."

For a moment Luther was undecided whether he would go ahead or not. In the end he realized that if he refused, someone else, Kelso perhaps, would make the jump, and what happened to the horse would not trouble him.

From Lefty's standpoint, the scene was a hundred per cent perfect this time. The pony went down, Luther fell clear and rolled to the water's edge. The horse, however, struggled to rise and could not.

Luther picked himself up, his eyes bright with a steely glitter. A glance told him the pony's right foreleg was broken. He brushed Vic aside and examined the animal.

"It would take a human rat like you to think of that sort of a trick," he exclaimed angrily. "Are you goin' to let this horse suffer or are you goin' to do somethin' about puttin' him out of the way?"

Tht telephone was ringing furiously. Vic chose to answer it rather than reply to Luther.

Up on the cliff, Link Bartlett was expressing what he thought about it to Lefty, and old Link was as wrathy as a grizzly.

"It ain't no way to treat horseflesh," he stormed.

"It was an accident, Sheriff," Lefty protested. "If that fool had only gone over right it wouldn't have hurt the horse."

"I been observin' that man," Link flung back. "He ain't no fool as I size him up. He's been a cowboy—and even the onery ones don't treat a bronc that-away. I want that animal put out of its misery."

"I'm telephoning now," Keenan informed him. "We'll have to send to camp for a gun, but we'll have it there quicker than you could get down into the canyon from here; they're got a Ford car down there."

"All right; I want to see somethin' done about it," said Link.

Vic had the keys to the company's store of firearms. Under penalty of instant dismissal he was forbidden to allow anyone but himself to enter the truck, big as a moving van, that contained the rifles, six-guns and ammunition to be used in the picture. Lefty Keenan, strangely enough for a director of Western pictures, had a horror of firearms, due to the fact that three years back a bit of carelessness had resulted in a law suit that had cost Important a staggering sum.

In addition to the several thousand rounds of blanks, under lock and key in the little arsenal, were a dozen clips of filled cartridges for just such emergencies as existed now.

Lefty made his order to Vic crisp and to the point.

"I'm going to camp for a rifle," Rosemon told Luther in turn. "I'll be back in ten minutes. You stay here."

He was as good as his word. Luther and the cameramen had managed to get the horse in among the trees along the creek bottom.

"Do you mind doing this job, Stillings?" Vic asked.

"You haven't any stomach for it, eh?" Luther rasped. "Give me the rifle!"

Vic slipped a clip of cartridges into the magazine of the gun, an old Krag-Jorgen-

son, one of a lot purchased from the Government by Important, and so altered as to be almost fool-proof for picture work. He pulled back the bolt and threw a cartridge into the barrel.

"You've got five loaded cartridges there," he warned. "Hand the rifle and the unused shells back to me personally when you're through."

"Too bad I can't use one of the five on you," Luther told him. Vic filed the threat away in his mind for future reference. It might come in handy.

Luther started to move away. The telephone rang. It was Keenan. Vic signalled for Luther to wait.

"I want everybody up here," said Lefty.

"But I thought we were going to do the attack on the rustlers next," Vic reminded him. His secret plans were being disrupted and he did not bother to hide his annoyance.

"Too late to get it to-day," Lefty replied. "Get your wagons out and we'll do the long shots of the train coming through the hills."

Vic relayed the order to the group on the creek.

"Throw your stuff in the car," he snapped. "I'll send the Ford back for you, Stillings."

They chugged away. Vic was listening, without seeming to, for sound of Luther's rifle. Presently he heard a report—only one—and remarked the fact to the others in the car.

"Guess he knows how to handle a gun," said a cameraman.

"Yeah," Vic agreed.

THAT evening Vic sat alone in the little arsenal loading the rifles that were to be used in the scene the following morning in which the posse rounded up the rustlers. The rifles would be handed to the extra men with the filled clips in place. To guard against any repetition of the accident that had cost Important so dear, the breach locks had been changed so that cartridges could not be fed into the barrel except by way of the clips. Since it was impossible to remove the clip until it was empty, careful loading of them seemed a complete guarantee against a slug finding its way in among the blanks. To insure the greatest care Lefty always insisted that his assistant do the loading.

As he worked, the rays from the dry cell lamp revealed Vic's face working nervously. He was free of prying eyes; alone with his thoughts and the opportunity he had foreseen for removing Luther. A dozen times his glance strayed to the clip of loaded cartridges which Luther had returned to him just before supper. He had stood the clip on a box. It was full, save for the one bullet Luther had fired.

The lead slugs glowed with an unholy fire for Vic. He had moved with great cunning, he believed. He had given him things to do that necessitated his leaving the gun unguarded for minutes at a time. A dozen men could have had access to it. He had even arranged it so that there had been no witness present when he took it back and counted the cartridges remaining in the clip to make sure all were accounted for.

Having discussed the scene in detail that was to be shot the following morning, he was able to visualize every move of it. The rustlers, a score in number, were to lie concealed on a flat ledge overlooking the canyon. Fifty yards below them, the posse would ride into view around a rocky shoulder. Luther, not doubling now, but playing a "bit," would be the first of the possemen to come into view. He would scan the canyon, hand shading his eyes. Not seeing anything of the rustlers, he would beckon for the rest of the posse to come ahead. At that moment, he was to detect a suspicious movement above him, and realizing his danger, try to throw himself to the ground. The warning was to come too late, the rustlers would fire and, his face contorted with pain, Luther was to slip to the ground mortally wounded.

One by one Vic loaded the rifles with blanks, and always his eyes returned to the clip of loaded shells.

"No one will ever know who did this," he mused. "The brass shells of the blanks and the loaded cartridges are identical. The rifle barrels will all be dirty. They don't know who to suspect."

But wouldn't they? Jeff Kelso was to be among the rustlers. He and Stillings had had trouble. That would be sure to come out.

"Jeff was near that rifle this afternoon," Vic recalled. "That could be brought out too. It would establish a motive."

Vic almost purred with pleasure. He would be the one to give out the guns. Why not give the right one to Jeff? He

was an excellent shot. Experience had taught Rosemon that men used to handling guns do not fire even blank shells without unconsciously drawing a bead. Jeff couldn't miss. He hated Stillings. When he brought that rifle to his shoulder he would be wishing it was loaded with slugs instead of harmless paper wads.

Vic glanced about him furtively, although he knew he was quite alone. Satisfied of it, he picked up the loaded clip and snapped a cartridge out. With practised hands he pushed it into the clip he was loading—first the bullet and then the four blanks. One round from the rustlers would send the leaden messenger of death on its way.

"That'll do it," he muttered, his breath short as he dropped the clip into the rifle and locked the magazine.

CHAPTER VII

The Hyphen Flash of Death

BY eight o'clock the following morning not less than a hundred people had arrived from Pine City and the nearby ranches to watch the company work. In some way the news had got about that some big scenes were to be shot. It was Sunday, and they came with lunch-baskets and the children, prepared to make a day of it. Lefty had to detail half-a-dozen men to keep them from taking up points of vantage that brought them within the camera lines.

As the morning came others arrived by automobile, wagon and on horseback. Merlin Smith and his wife arrived. He was a privileged visitor, and he found a choice spot for his wife and himself behind the main battery of cameras. Old Link was already on the ground.

"Sure brings back old times, Merlin," he said fondly as Keenan rehearsed the rustlers.

"I suppose it does," Merlin answered reprovingly. "I should think it would be more interesting to make a movie showing the progress of this country."

Link said no more. Keenan had finished with the cattle-thieves. They were experienced extras. Dick Cronin, the leader of the gang, was an actor of no little ability. He now turned his attention to the posse.

"Come on, Stillings; walk through it!" he called out.

Luther came into view as he was supposed to do and registered the proper action, but when he tried to slip out of the saddle he could hardly get his leg over the cantle. Keenan called a halt.

"That'll never do," he exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"I bruised my left leg worse than I thought yesterday, comin' down that rock slide," said Luther. "I don't believe I can do this job."

"You're not trying!" Vic whipped out viciously. "You don't have to be afraid of taking a fall!" He did not propose to have his scheme go for nothing. He spoke hurriedly to Lefty.

"Try it again," Keenan ordered.

A second attempt was no improvement.

"No use wasting any more time with you, Stillings," Lefty decided. "You take Kelso's place with the rustlers and send him down here."

Vic's cheeks blanched. For a moment he could not marshal his thoughts. He started to speak, to protest against this change that would bring all his diabolic scheming to naught, but some sense of caution warned him to think twice before he uttered a word.

He asked himself if Stillings could possibly have suspected his danger. "No," he thought, "he couldn't have got wise."

With his blood running cold there passed before his mind every move he had made. He could recall nothing he had done that would lead to his exposure no matter who fired the bullet.

Suddenly a cell in his brain ticked faster. . . . Stillings and Kelso had quarreled; the same motive that would have been advanced in the first instance still held true, even though the killer and killed had changed places.

The thought gave Vic poise. With devilish satisfaction he realized how much more believable it would be that yesterday when Luther had had the clip of loaded cartridges in his possession he had retained one for this deed.

"It will be up to me to say how many shells he returned," he thought quickly. "The cameramen know he fired only once. If I claim Stillings returned only three bullets, who can deny it?"

He moistened his dry lips with his tongue. In some ways he relished the thought of Luther in the toils of the law, charged with murder—more than what he had proposed himself.

All unknowing of the fate in store for him, Jeff Kelso swaggered down the hill and listened to Lefty's instructions. He felt he was coming back into his own.

Jeff had not been in a saddle in months. He was stiff and slow; however, he made the fall after a fashion; but it was not that part of his performance that made Lefty throw up his hands in disgust. Jeff was one of the world's worst actors, and his manner was as wooden as a cigar store Indian.

"My God, Kelso, you're not leading a troop of boy scouts around the shoulder of this mountain!" he stormed. "I'm not asking much of you. This is just a simple bit of business that I'm going to have right if I stay here all day."

He emoted for Jeff; gave him every reaction he was to take. They tried it again then; he saw no improvement. "Vic, get on that horse and show Kelso what we want. We've done this thing in fifty pictures."

Vic was only too willing to coach Jeff. By no chance did he want him to fail—to escape the bullet that was waiting for him.

"That's it!" Lefty cried as Vic rode into view. "Watch him, Kelso; that's what I want!"

Vic repeated his performance several times before Keenan let Jeff try it again. Kelso didn't get very far before Lefty stopped him.

"Vic, he can't get it. I'm going to let you do the bit. Slap a little make-up on your face."

Vic needed make-up to hide his pallor. In a panic he turned away, his senses reeling, his beady little eyes bulging in their sockets. How could he call a halt now? How could he ask to have the rifles examined without convicting himself of having put the loaded cartridge in the gun now in Luther Stillings' hands? What possible reason could he advance for his sudden suspicion?

"They'd get me," he thought; "they'd know I tried to get Stillings.

That would mean dismissal, the end of his days in pictures—prison!

A CRAVEN at heart, he steeled himself to do the one thing that promised safety for him. He would ride in fast and throw himself to the ground as quickly as he could. He would bungle the shot, but the bullet would pass harmlessly over his head. Lefty would bring him back then, and they would film the scene as he wanted it.

"Are you ready?" he heard Keenan call.

"Yeah," Vic answered. the word sticking in his throat. He heard the order given to the cameramen to start grinding. He glanced at his stirrups; he must not get his feet caught. He wiggled his toes, or tried to. His feet were leaden. He felt one of the possemen nudge him to go ahead. But still he hesitated. Now that the moment had come for him to take his chance, he wanted to flee.

"What are you shakin' for?" the man next him whispered gruffly. "They're waitin' for us."

Vic tried to get his breath.

"Well, are you coming?" Keenan yelled, breaking in on the sound truck.

"I got to do it," Vic muttered incoherently. It was too late to back out now. He dug his heels into the pony and tried to urge him into a burst of speed.

In a moment he came into view. He took one look across the canyon and leaped from his saddle. The volley rang out from the rustlers' guns.

Vic seemed to twist in mid-air. When he came down he lay still.

Keenan ran up, fuming with anger.

"Say, what the hell is this?" he began. "I told you. . . ."

The words died in his throat. He was staring at Vic. Blood was streaking Rosemon's forehead.

The possemen leaped to the ground, consternation written on their faces.

"Vic," Keenan called, "what's the matter?" He got no answer. He bent down and examined the wound. "My God," he groaned, "he's been shot—he's dead!"

CHAPTER VIII

Under Western Skies

THE company doctor was called. There was nothing he could do; Vic Rosemon was beyond mortal aid.

Zabriskie appealed to the sheriff to keep the curious back. Nat's teeth were chattering. Being in charge, the studio would hold him indirectly responsible for the tragedy.

"I use all the care in the world," he said to Merlin Smith, "and then an accident like this has got to happen!"

"You call this an accident?" Merlin inquired sternly. "That man was murdered! As the district attorney of this county, I'm taking charge right now."

"But let me call the studio," Nat pleaded. "We can't have any unpleasant publicity about this. They'll send someone right away to see you." With him all things stemmed from the studio.

"That's their privilege," Merlin remarked frigidly. "I might remind you, this happens to be the State of Utah; we'll handle this matter our way and without any interference from Los Angeles."

"You don't mind our taking Vic to the hospital tent, do you?" Lefty asked. Rosemon's death had shaken him.

"I'll have to insist that you leave the body there until the coroner comes," Merlin informed him brusquely. It was a very important moment in his life and he was rising to it nobly. He turned to old Link. "Mr. Sheriff, will you line up those men who fired the volley? I want to question them. One of them killed that man."

"I tell you it was an accident," Nat argued. "Those guys thought they were shooting blanks. Vic loaded the rifles himself. Even he didn't know he'd slipped in a slug by mistake, or he never would have let them blaze away at him."

"That's a fact," Lefty agreed.

"Huh!" Merlin snorted. "You prove my point." He had little respect for their powers of deduction. "Naturally that man didn't fear those guns if he loaded them. He didn't put a bullet into one of them; that was done after they got out of his hands."

Nat tried to tell him that was impossible, but the district attorney refused to listen. He led the way up the slope to the rustlers' nest, half the company following them.

Link lined Luther and the others up in a row. They had seen Vic drop and realized they were under suspicion.

"There was just one round fired, Sheriff," Merlin exclaimed. "I wish you would try to find the ejected shells."

It was no difficult task. "Here they are," Link informed him presently. "Twenty-one of 'em; that's one a piece."

Merlin examined them. They were identical, the U. S. arsenal mark stamped in each. If he was disappointed, he hid it.

"How many shells were issued to these men?" he asked Nat.

"Five—a full clip to each man. I tell you. . . ."

"Please, Mr. Zabriskie," Merlin interrupted. "I'll handle this investigation." He turned to Link once more. "Sheriff, I want you to empty every one of these rifles."

Link obliged, but in each case he found four blank shells remaining in the magazine. Merlin Smith pulled down the corners of his mouth; this crime was not going to be solved so easily after all.

He strode up and down the line trying to cow the men with his accusing eyes. Link rather pitied him. Merlin was too immature and dapper-looking with his little mustache and patent-leather hair to strike fear in the heart of anyone.

He finally stopped his charging back and forth.

"This was cold-blooded, premeditated murder!" he exclaimed, fixing each of them with his eyes, "One of you slipped a loaded shell into your gun. It couldn't have been done without some of you seeing it."

Bonnie arrived in time to hear what he said. Her glance went to Luther.

"I want to warn you not to let any foolish sense of loyalty to the guilty man keep you from speaking up," Merlin continued. "What have you got to say?"

They had nothing to say, other than to express their complete innocence.

"It might pay you to talk," Merlin declared darkly. Balked in one direction, he decided to try another. Perhaps he could establish a motive for the crime. He addressed himself to Nat and Lefty.

"To your knowledge, has any of these men ever had a quarrel with Rosemon?"

Bonnie saw Luther's mouth straighten grimly. Her own heart skipped a beat.

"Stillings had trouble with Vic," Jeff Kelso volunteered.

"The man on the end?"

"Yeah," Jeff answered.

Lefty Keenan could only confirm the fact.

"And the others?" Merlin drove on. He felt he was getting somewhere now.

"Not that I know of," said Lefty.

Luther was told to step forward. Merlin glowered at him. "Why did you kill that man?" he whipped out viciously.

"I don't believe I killed him," Luther answered stonily.

"You don't believe you killed him," Mer-

lin taunted. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean I took the rifle that was handed me and fired it as I was directed."

Merlin studied one of the empty shells. "The caliber of these cartridges is a standard .30-.30," he said, "but any cartridge you would buy in a store would have the maker's name stamped on it. There isn't any maker's name on any of the empty shells; nothing but the arsenal mark. Did you bring any loaded cartridges with you, Mr. Zabriskie?"

"A few," Nat admitted. "We need them sometimes, like yesterday when we had to shoot a horse."

LINK had not been impressed with the prosecutor's logic. Experience had taught him that Merlin could be a cantankerous little gnat whose buzzing could be disturbing. As for Luther, Link liked him, what little he had seen of him. He was a man cut after his own pattern. He couldn't find anything about him to suggest the cowardly killer. But now that he recalled it was Luther who had ended the suffering of the injured pony Merlin's reasoning was suddenly more convincing.

"Stillings shot the horse," he explained reluctantly.

"Oh, he did, eh?" Merlin's satisfaction was evident. In short order he had a graphic picture painted for him by the cameraman who had been on the creek bottom the previous afternoon. The man recalled that Vic had told Luther he was giving him five loaded cartridges; that Luther had used only one in dispatching the injured horse. He even thought to remember what Luther had said about it being too bad he couldn't use one of the slugs on Vic.

Now, the district attorney not only had a motive but a previous threat of violence; and he had established a chain of circumstances by which Luther could have provided himself with the fatal bullet.

He turned to Luther.

"Do you deny you threatened Rosemon yesterday?"

"I don't deny I told him it was too bad I couldn't use one of the cartridges on him," Luther admitted. "It was not a threat."

"No?" Merlin snickered skeptically. "You had the rifle in your possession, however."

"Yeah—"

"For how long?"

"I was ready to return it in a few minutes, but Rosemon was too busy to take it. It was just before supper then I went over to the ammunition truck and handed it to him."

"Anyone see you do it?"

"No, we were alone in the truck."

The district attorney nodded ponderously.

"Then no one knows how many bullets you returned to him," he murmured accusingly. "Rosemon knew—and he is dead and cannot speak." He shook his head as though that settled the matter. "Seems to me, Stillings, the case against you is complete. You hated Rosemon. Yesterday you got possession of a loaded cartridge, the brass shell of which was identical with the blanks. When your opportunity came, you slipped it in and killed him."

Bonnie stepped up to Merlin. "Aren't you jumping to a rather absurd conclusion, Mr. Smith?" she asked, her manner unbelievably calm.

Merlin snapped erect and stared at her with open hostility.

"I would expect you to feel that way," he said cuttingly. "I assume it was over you these men quarreled. Your testimony may be very important, Miss Williams."

Luther could have slapped him down for his insolence.

"Undoubtedly," Bonnie remarked, "but hardly in the way you expect."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Mr. Smith, has it occurred to you that possibly the wrong man was killed? That bullet may have been intended for Luther Stillings. Only his lameness kept him from being the one to ride into the line of fire."

The fact was pertinent enough to cast doubt on his whole structure of evidence. Merlin did not bother to hide his annoyance.

"That's a fact," Lefty declared to Smith's further discomfiture. "It was only at the last moment that I sent Stillings up here. In all our talks he understood he was to stay below. He had no reason to believe he would be up here. When he came, he took Kelso's rifle."

"Say, you ain't tryin' to pin this on me, are yuh?" Jeff burst out hotly. "I didn't have anythin' to do with it."

"I'm not saying you did," Lefty informed him. "You would hardly have been willing to trade places with Stillings if you knew there was a slug in any of these guns."

Merlin pounced on the thought eagerly.

"Now you prove my point," said he. "Kelso didn't know or he would have refused to face the fire; and that goes for Rosemon too. Do you think he would have taken Stillings' place if he had known he was likely to be killed?"

Bonnie broke the silence that followed. "That's exactly what I think," she declared. She spoke now to Lefty rather than the prosecutor. "You rehearsed Vic; he knew what you wanted. But he raced into the scene and flung himself off his horse without even bothering to glance up here. He was trying to beat that volley; he knew his danger—what other reason could he have had for doing what he did?"

"VERY interesting," Merlin Smith said. His tone was patronizing now. "Unfortunately you can't prove it."

"Perhaps I can," Bonnie answered resolutely. "I'm prepared to swear that Vic Rosemon told me he would get Luther. He hated him. But for the last-minute switch, he would have accomplished what he set out to do—and he would never have been suspected."

"I'm beginnin' to understand why Rosemon made me keep that gun all afternoon," Luther exclaimed, before Merlin could rush to the aid of his tottering hypothesis. "Three or four times he made me set the rifle down to help him get the wagons in line." Luther turned to Jeff Kelso. "He did it once when you and me were havin' trouble with those mules. He was just plantin' that rifle so you could get to it and slip a shell out if you wished."

"I didn't do it!" Jeff thundered.

"Course you didn't. Rosemon was just fixin' things so you *could* have done it. He knew there would be an investigation after I was killed. He knew it would come out that you and me had had trouble, and you'd be accused just as this man is accusin' me now; that little rat would have sworn your life away by tellin' how you had been near that rifle." He paused to face Smith. "Mr. Prosecutor, I ain't sorry that man is dead; he was a skunk. But I didn't set out to kill him. If there was a slug in the rifle, I didn't know it."

"I'd hardly expect you to admit it," Merlin answered testily. "There is abundant evidence to warrant holding you. Sheriff, put this man under arrest for suspicion of murder."

Old Link had been examining the rifle Luther had used. The gun seemed to fascinate him.

"Well—" Merlin prompted impatiently.

"Merlin, he couldn't have done it," Link declared calmly. "Look at this!" He filled a clip with blanks and pushed it into the magazine. "You can't pull the clip out now. I can only get my fingers around the bottom cartridge, and get it out. That clip won't come out until it's empty."

Merlin professed not to see the point.

"Well, I'll show you what I mean," said Link. He pulled the gun bolt back. "Now, suppose I want to slip a loaded cartridge into the chamber. Can I do it? I can not! A dog has been put on this breech that makes that impossible. The only way you can feed this gun is from the magazine. Stillings could not have fired a bullet until his fifth shot. You can't get away from it. That slug was put in the clip by the man who loaded the gun!"

Merlin flushed angrily. He knew his case had fallen flat. "The fact remains that a man has been killed," he said shrilly.

"Yes, and if ever a killer killed himself it was this fellow Rosemon," Link declared. "You can't prove anythin' else."

Months later Vic Rosemon's tragic death was only an unpleasant memory. Bonnie sat in the stand at Pendleton, watching the riders come out of the chutes.

"Luther Stillings coming out on number one on a little bucking horse called Nightmare!" the loudspeakers boomed. "It looks like an early fall!"

Bonnie recognized that voice. Good old Ike Vance, with his wisecracks. It was good to be back among her own people again.

"Stay a long time, Cowboy!" she cried as Luther flashed into view.

They had dinner together that evening. He had won the day's prize, but there was a brooding light in his eyes.

"I suppose you've signed that contract," he ventured, "and will be headin' for Hollywood."

"I couldn't sign it, Luther," she whispered. "There was a 'no-marriage' clause in it. . . ."

The Ranch Mail Pouch

Our RANCH MAIL POUCH is open to all readers of REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE. Here, we can all get together and compare notes and trail sign with our unseen friends throughout the world. Just write in, addressing THE MAIL POUCH, Room 204, 165 Franklin St., New York City. We'll print your letter; and, if you don't want your address in, send it confidential to us and we will forward answers to you. Above all, tell us what you think of the stories in REAL WESTERN and what you want to read in these pages.
Come on, trail riders, let's hear from you in time to make the next mail pouch.

FOREMAN "JIM."

A LONESOME GIRL OF WALES

Dear Jim:

I would appreciate it a lot if you would publish this letter in your magazine. I would like to hear from Pen Pals all over the world. Boys and girls from sixteen up to twenty-six please write to me and you will be sure of a reply. I love all sports, swimming and dancing, and anything with adventure, so travelers, sailors, cowpunchers, etc., and girls please write.

Here is my description, I am 5 ft. 2 in. and I have auburn hair, brown eyes, fair complexion, and 126 lbs. in weight. I am sixteen years of age and I promise to be a true Pen Pal. I will exchange photographs and picture cards with anyone. LILIAN GEORGE.

1A Lewis Street, Riverside, Cardiff.
South Wales, Great Britain.

ARIZONANS, TEXANS AND OKLAHOMANS WANTED

Dear Foreman Jim:

I am a reader of your magazine and enjoy it very much.

I am writing in to see if you can get me some Pen Pals.

I'm a very lonesome girl of Norfolk. Would like to correspond with people living in Arizona, Texas and Oklahoma.

I am going to still continue to buy the magazine, they are so thrilling.

I am seventeen years old, blonde hair, brown eyes, am 5 ft. 5½ in. tall, and 102 lbs. weight.

So print my letter, won't you, Jim, so some of the Western Pen Pals and I can bring Southeast and the West a little closer through correspondence.

See what you can do, Jim, in getting me some friends. VERGIE STYRON.

A TREASURE HUNTER

Dear Foreman Jim:

I guess that I'm one of them Treasure Hunters, yep, that's me.

Just a fellow that occasionally finds time to take an occasional trek into some of the out of the way places, maybe it will be up in the hills where you've got to watch the seasons to get in, and maybe out on the desert where you can drink water from a canteen that will burn your lips.

Sometimes it might be a search for a lost mine, a hidden cave, a buried treasure and maybe it will be just plain prospecting, usually without any reward, but yet the constant hope that some day you will strike it rich, anyhow I like it.

Usually starting out with all of the luxuries of a city life, a straight 8 car which I have covered some many thousand miles with the last couple of years, plenty of camp equipment, then finding a place where the car is left, horses taken and maybe winding up on foot, ending up broke and hungry before I get back.

For treasure locating I use an electrical or Radio Locater and it really works and is able to locate buried metal of any kind.

Now I would like to hear from any one that knows of a likely location, either buried money, lost mine or anything in that line, and it might be possible that I could arrange to include in my next trip the location or some location of which I may hear and maybe make a find that would pay for the trip. Any locations that I might arrange to prospect or check out will be handled on a percentage basis.

of Los Angeles. EARL M. N.

CONFIRMED BACHELOR

Dear Jim:

Just finished reading a REAL WESTERN. *Liked it fine Jim, but will like it still better if you will get me some Pen Pals.*

I am a bachelor, 34 years old, have brown hair and eyes, weight 150 lbs. and am 5' 5" tall.

I like outdoor sports, such as hunting and trapping, and am interested in taxidermy.

I also like traveling, which I have done plenty of, via the box car route.

Well, that is the biggest part of my pedigree. I would like to hear from any one who wouldn't mind writing to an old (confirmed) bachelor.

CHARLES GRASSER.

Box 418, Rugby, N. Dak.

A SAILOR IN THE QUEEN'S NAVY

Dear Jim:

I bought one book by accident once, and now I look for it in every port and always get my REAL WESTERN. *I am a great reader of it.*

And if there is any one who would like to exchange chats I will be glad as ours is a great life. I am 17 years old, 5 ft. 8 in. tall, weigh 126 lbs. and light hair, interested in all sports.

No. 568, J. GARRIGAN.

Mess 34, H.M.S. Nelson,
c/o GPO, London.

BLONDES ARE PREFERRED HERE

Hello, Foreman Jim:

I am a constant reader of your fine old Mag. which rates A1 with me.

I am 30 yrs. old, 5 ft. 11, weigh 180, dark brown hair and blue grey eyes.

Have traveled quite a bit and expect to do so again (foreign countries included) and I wonder, Jim if you could find me a few pals either sex who would like to travel with me via the old mail box as it is always nice to read letters and see snaps of other places.

I expect to get started in a year or less. So come on, pals, let's get lined up. Snaps of old Mexico, Panama and U. S. exchanged for yours and what have you. All letters answered. Blondes preferred.

FRANKIE THE WANDERER.

OUR SOUTH CHINESE AUDIENCE GROWS

Dear Jim:

We are four lonely soldiers whiling away our time in the Far East. We do appreciate your REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE, *which unfortunately we have only just discovered to be so very interesting and we feel we must congratulate the authors on such excellent stories. We will in future be constant readers. We would very much like to correspond with other readers, and we will answer all mail we receive and exchange snaps and views of the Orient. We are all interested in every type of outdoor sport.*

THE FOUR FUSILIERS.

Age 19 years, 4192123 Fus. Jim Cole. Age 19 years, 4192007 Fus. Alf. Garlick. Age 20 years, 6342409 Fus. Eddie Rees. Age 21 years, 4189146 Fus. Jackie Thomas.
2nd Batt. R. W. Fus. B. Coy,
Hankow Bks., Sham-shui-Poo,
Kowloon, South China.

A BUTTER AND EGG MAN

Dear Jim:

As straw-boss on your Buckeye range I'd like to hear from anyone who can write with pen, pencil, crayons or chalk.

Age, size, creed, color, shape, nationality, sex or looks are no drawbacks.

There has been a drought in letters hereabouts except those that come the first of the month.

Any with that idea save postage.

I've been around, at present am here and might go there if you can sell me the idea.

My crew runs in ages from eight to eighty, so we're ink-slinging fools.

Will exchange anything but my name. No numbers desired.

Anyone writing they are lonely will be considered an insult if seen in the column.

If "Lonesome Mary" or "California Doris" read this, write and your troubles will be over.

I'm 29, white, American, 5 ft. 11 in., 165 lbs., brown hair, eyes and skin and a male.

Man-haters, pessimists and lonesome parties my specialty.

"HUMPTY DUMPTY."

c/o Donald F. England,
324 Summit St., Fostoria, Ohio.

MEMBER OF ROYAL AUSTRALIAN ENGINEERS

Dear Jim:

I am a constant reader of REAL WESTERN *and would very much like to join your Pen Pals list.*

I am eighteen, five feet four inches, blue eyed, and blonde hair. My favorite sports are football (Rugby League) and swimming.

I am a soldier in the Royal Australian Engineers and would like to communicate with a girl about my age, living in America, who would exchange snapshots, souvenirs, and American coins for Australian.

LESLIE C. LOWE.

263 Abercrombie St., Redfern, Sydney,
N. S. Wales, Australia.

SOLDIERS AND WADDYS WANTED

Dear Jim:

How're you all comin' along? Fine I hope.

I want to tell you, Jim, what I think of REAL WESTERN. *It just "caint be beat."*

Jim, don't you-all think it's kinda mean of a "jella" not to answer a girl's letter, especially because it's considered kinda bad manners fer a girl to write first. You know some fellas write in to you, askin' for Pen Pals and whin they git some, they don't write. I think that's powerful mean.

Jim, will you do me a favor now, please? Print this hyer letter in yore column for two reasons: First—'cause I haven't seen any letters in from my town before and second—because I want Pen Pals.

So come on you "jellas" in the army in the Far East and you cow punchers in the West (if there are any), and see if you-all can't drop a girl from Penna. a line.

I'm almost 18. I'm 5 feet 4 inches tall, have grey-blue eyes and reddish-brown hair.

Anyone is welcome to write. I'll answer you one and all.

ANNA M. SONNEN.

Robesonia, Pa.

THE BOYS ARE BOTH ATHLETES

Dear Jim:

Just yesterday we happened to find an old issue of the REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *dated June, 1935, and upon reading it found it so interesting we purchased every book since then.*

One (Denny) is eighteen years old, five feet 8 inches tall, weight 140, blond hair and great follower of all sports.

The other (Duffy) is eighteen years old, five feet 5 inches tall, light curly brown hair, weight 130 and like Denny a great athlete.

We are not extremely handsome but are not so hard to look at and are willing to exchange snapshots with anyone in the country. So come on, Pen Pals, be sports and write to two lonesome town boys. (Western girls as well as Eastern girls welcome.)

(DENNY) DENNIS VIERA, JR.
(DUFFY) RUDOLPH GIGLIO, JR.
421 Hope Street, Bristol, R. I.

INK SLINGERS WANTED

Dear Foreman Jim:

We are two girls way down in old Kentucky and we surely would like just loads of Pen Pals. We would like most of all to hear from cowboys and cowgirls, but all of you are welcome. So come on you folks and sling some ink our way.

One is 16 years of age, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, weighs 125 lbs. and has black curly hair and brown eyes.

The other is 17 years of age, 5 ft. 5 in. tall, weighs 115 lbs. and has golden brown hair and blue eyes. So this leaves us wishing REAL WESTERN *luck and success, and also hoping to get more stories from Charles Alden Seltzer.*

Yours truly,
(Dark) BERTHA RALEY.
(Light) FLORENCE WILLETT.

Waverly, Ky.,
R. R. No. 3.

TEXAS RANCHMAN

Hello, Jim:

Just a few lines from a Texas ranchman. I own a 19,000 acre ranch and it sure is lonesome down here by myself, although I have plenty to do.

Here's my idea to keep from getting lonesome. I want all your girl readers to write me letters. Come on, girls, get romantic, and write to a Texas ranchman.

Don't think I'm offending you gentlemen. I want all horsemen, sailors, soldiers, and aviators, also boxers and wrestlers to write long interesting letters. Oh, yeah, dudes too. Send pictures if possible.

Here's my description: 6 ft. 1 inch tall, brown wavy hair, blue eyes, weight 163 pounds, and dark complexion.

I have been in 8 foreign countries. I have punched cattle in all Western states. I've been in 3 gun fights and 2 knife fights and a good many fist fights. I'm still alive and healthy. I am 23 years old. I still like to go places and do things.

Jim, how about you sending me your picture? I'll bet you're just gorgeous.

Well, girls and boys, my mail box is a big one, so fill it up.

Adios, mi chaparajos,
COURTNEY SIPES.

Route 2, Olney, Texas.

A COUPLE OF DESERT AVIATORS

Dear Jim:

We have just read a copy of REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *and we both thought it was great as we go the bundle on Western yarns.*

As you can see from the address, we are in the Royal Air Force and stationed at Khartoum in the Sudan.

We are very much interested in the Ranch Mail Pouch and should like to have Pen Pals from all over the world. We are respectively—age 23, 5 ft. 7 tall, blonde wavy hair, weight 146 lbs., and the other age 23, 5 ft. 5 tall, black hair, weight 136 lbs.

We should like to hear from girls, as we are out on the desert and never see much of any girl friends. Hoping you will forward this plea for pen friends for us.

Yours Sincerely,
WILLIAM BAYLEY.
FRED ROBINSON.

Workshops Flight,
47 (B) Squadron, R.A.F.,
Khartoum, Sudan, East Africa.

A REAL WESTERN FAN

Foreman Jim:

I have been a reader of Western stories for a long time and altho Max Brand was my favorite author I think that Clarence E. Mulford is a clever writer and when I saw a REAL WESTERN *that was featuring a novel by him I picked it up and brought it home and ever since then I've become a* REAL WESTERN *fan. And as long as your stories continue with the same high standard of western stories I will remain one. And after I gave a copy to one friend it seemed as if all his friends and mine sure went for it and now we can hardly wait for the next issue.*

So good luck to REAL WESTERN!

Please include my name in your list for Pen Pals in your Mail Pouch.

VINCENT MONTANARO.

158 Calhoun Ave.,
Bridgeport, Conn.

A WELL EDUCATED YOUNG LADY

Dear Jim:

I have just finished reading a few stories in your wonderful Western Book, and I can truthfully say that every story was very interesting.

Do you suppose you could find a few Pen Pals for a lonely blonde girl, five feet five inches, weighs one hundred twenty-two pounds? I hope you can, as I love to write letters to those in other states, cities, and perhaps other countries.

I am well educated and I am at present on the farm with my parents.

The last few years I have been living in cities and towns so as to secure the best advantages toward education.

I will exchange snapshots with all young men (between eighteen and twenty-five). Young ladies are welcome to write too.

I guess I'll state a few facts about myself, so you won't be disappointed about who you write to—I'm not a girl who likes a "fast lot" of friends, I mean those who drink, gamble, or smoke (much). I do not dance, for one reason is that my parents did not teach me to, though I would like to learn. I love to travel and always see the bright side of life.

Are you willing to write or not? Don't neglect this plea—it is a sincere request.

MISS F. B. McL.

of Okla.

A CALIFORNIA RAMBLER

Dear Boss:

Will you kindly include me in your Ranch Mail Pouch for some Pen Pals?

I'm 29 years of age, 67 inches tall, ruddy complexion, brown eyes, and curly hair.

Have rambled over North, Central and South America, in the Marine Corps—Merchant Marine—and adventurer. Like to hear from most anyone who wishes to write—and I'll do my best to answer one and all.

I speak and read Spanish, but do not write it, I also read and speak some French, so from wherever these letters should come I'll do my best to answer them—Swedish, German, French or Italian. Now doggone it write to

THE VAGABOND L. L. KLUSE.

Box 746, State School for Boys,
Whittier, Calif.

A YOUNG MISS

Dear Jim:

Please print my letter in your Pen Pal department. I will gladly answer all letters I receive.

I am a girl 13 yrs. old and am 4 ft. 11½ in. tall. I have light hair and blue eyes. I would like to hear from girls and boys all over U. S. A.

GLADYS HILL.

Tryon, Nebr.

NOT HARD TO LOOK AT

Dear Jim:

I have just finished reading my first REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *and I think it's great. The novel "Gun Law Range" is one good story, give us some more of that type. I am looking for Pen Pals all over the world especially from the West. I am 5 ft. 7, weight 135, fair complexion, and considered not bad to look at. Will exchange snapshots. I like all sports, music, and hiking. I wish* REAL WESTERN *the best of luck.*

JOS. B. BEDNAR.

542 Railroad St.,
Windber, Pennsylvania.

MISS ROSADELL "Rosy" Johnson (16, interested in all sports), Box 54, Chicago City, Minn.

KENT TAYLOR (22, prefers girls who like adventure), 707 Cumberland St., Dallas, Texas.

MISS VIOLET REA (26, will send snapshots, post cards and newspapers), 64 Sampson Rd., Sparkbrook, Birmingham 11, Warwickshire, Eng.

LESLIE ASKEW (19, will answer all letters), 90 Parrock St., Gravesend, Kent, England.

MISS VERA MURPHY (boys and girls of 17 and 18 wanted), Mason St., Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, Australia.

DOUIE LOGAN (16, plays a guitar), Route 3, Stratford, Okla.

LYLE CALVERT (goodnatured), U. S. Vet. CCC Camp 3815, Yukon, Okla.

MISS HELEN HOFFE (35, milk maid on farm), R.F.D. 2, Fayette, Ia.

LESTER C. WUESTERFELD (16, football player), 448 Klotter Ave., Cincinnati, O.

MISS MAMIE NELSON (21, radio yodler), Route 1, Decatur, Ala.

WILLARD SMITH (19, considered handsome), Coast Artillery, Fort De Russy, Honolulu, T. H.

PHILIP BAIN (28, nature loving inventor), Box 254, Fort Peck, Mont.

BILL MAGILL (17, 6 ft. 1 in., wants to be a forest ranger), Salisbury, Mo.

MISS CAROLYNE GEVIRTS (18, considered pretty), 2063 W. Lawrence Ave., Chicago.

R. LATTIMORE (22, part Indian), Forest City, N. C.

ADDIE WALKER (17, will exchange snapshots), 517 W. Lincoln St., Luverne, Minn.

HERBERT MARGAN (15, fond of all sports), Route 1, Kemard, Texas.

MISS EMOGENE WEED (16, blue eyes), 710 Keneke Rd., Darien, Conn.

EDWARD SCHREIBER (19, weakness for blondes, brunettes and redheads), Coast Artillery, Fort De Russy, Honolulu, T. H.

MISS THELMA FAIR (16, junior in high school), 2186 N. 23rd St., Akron, Ohio.

MISS LAURA TALSTRUP (20, likes outdoor sports, music, and reading), 336 4th St. S.E., Puyallup, Wash.

MISS CORA E. GOLDSMITH (22, has presents for first ten who write), 334 Ashton Ave., Lima, Ohio.

AUGUSTINE F. SANTOS (30, stranger in California), P. O. Box 769, Vallva, Calif.

MISS ANNIE SANDRES (5 ft. 5 in., some people call her pretty), 309 N. Townville St., Seneca, S. C.

MISS MILDRED E. GREEN (15, wants pen pals from everywhere), Virginia St., Farmville, Va.

JOHN W. UPPERMAN (kitchen worker), U. S. Vet. CCC Camp 3815, Yukon, Okla.

MISS ANN FRAITAS (early teens, loves swimming), Pinole, Calif.

ALBERT LA PLANT (17, wants to exchange snapshots and postcards), 258 Park Ave., East Hartford, Conn.

DERMOTT JEWELL (would like to hear from cowboys and American girls), 16 Warrenmount Place, S. C. Rd., Dublin, Ireland.

MISS ELEONORE BISEK (15, wants loads of letters), 856 N. Lincoln St., Chicago.

MISS GERTRUDE INGRAHAM (23, hazel eyes and brown hair), 558 Ridgeway Ave., Rochester, N. Y.

JACK DILLENBECK (32, wants female correspondents, ages 25 to 32), Camp St. Marys, G. N. P.-11, 575th Co. CCC, Glacier Pk., Mont.

MISS BILLIE LEAVENTON (teens, rides like a cowboy), 3601 S. Presa St., San Antonio, Texas.

CURTIS O'DONNELL (soldier in mountain artillery), Battery A, 2nd F. A., Fort Clayton, C. Z.

MISS DOLLY NEFF (16, boys between 15 and 25 wanted), Route 1, Poteau, Okla.

TOMMY DAVIS (16, come on, girls, write to a lonely kid), Rt. 2, Box 265, Porterville, Calif.

MORGAN ROSS (14, likes girls with sweet dispositions), 6076 Franklin Ave., Hollywood, Calif.

ROY POERTNER (27, 6 ft., outdoor lover), 431 S. Harrison Ave., Kirkwood, Mo.

MISS FREDA CHASTAIN (16, brown hair, blue eyes), 245 Ariz. Apt., Trinidad, Col.

JOSEPH A. PETER (wants to hear from stamp collectors), 400 Norton Way, Bucyrus, Ohio.

MISS TOMMIE McKANE (33, circus people and wild west riders wanted), Star City, Ark., Monticello, R. c/o Mrs. N. E. Robinson.

LAWRENCE MADISON (30, loves reading and letter writing), 761 10th Ave., New York City.

NORMAN WILLETE (18, jack of all trades), 220 Main St., Fort Kent, Maine.

GLENN CHICHESTER (34, turkey rancher), Route 3, Wayne, Nebr.

Curios and Relics For Sale

Satisfaction or Money Back

Postage extra, 5¢ if you insure is extra

Genuine Camera Photos.....5¢ each

Wild Bill, Calamity Jane, Belle Starr, Emmet Dalton, Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack, Bat Masterson, Billy the Kid, Frank James, Jessie James, Henry Starr, Idaho Bill, Hardin, California Joe, Dick Rutledge, Patt Garrett, J. W. Poe, Temple Houston, Rowdy Joe Hunt (gunman), Idaho Bill, Pawnee Bill, Landon Scout, Grat Dalton, Dead Dalton Gang, Hanged Horse Thieves, Scalped White Man, Dead Indian Medicine Man, Dead Indians after Battle Wounded Knee, Custer, Dead Mexican Bandit, Villa, Anne Oakley, Frank Dalton, Bob Younger, Cole Younger, Billy Bullock, Sam Starr, Joe Miller, Judge C. Parker, The Crooked Kid, Deadwood Dick, Deadwood Stage Coach, Bill Tilghman, Boney Earnest, Dr. Carver, Diamond Dick, Three Hanged Outlaws, Busk Taylor (king of all cowboys), McCanles (man Wild Bill killed), Rose of the Cimmarron, Arkansas Tim, Luke Short, Bassett, Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, White Bull, Crazy Horse, Red Tomahawk (killer of Sitting Bull), Curley Custers (scout), Kit Carson, Kit Carson's grave, Kit Carson's Home, Block House (Hays, Kansas), 40,000 Buffalo Hides in one pile (Dodge City), Scalp Dance, Wounded Knee Dance, Officers of Wounded Knee Battle, Old Fort Pine Ridge, S. D., Texas Ranger's Grave, John Brown's Battlefield, Jessie James when dead, Princess Rose Budd Robe —all fine.

5 perfect Kansas arrowheads	25¢
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Beautiful wide horse hair hat band	1.00
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10 different fine foreign coins	15¢
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Pretty large gem rock crystal	15¢

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Send 5 Cents for Illustrated Catalogue

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THE TRADING POST

Here is where the readers of REAL WESTERN can exchange something they have, but do not want, for something that someone else may have and that you may want.
This is a free service, but your announcement must not exceed 28 words. It must be understood that REAL WESTERN is not responsible for losses sustained.
Print your announcement clearly. Nothing but bona fide "swaps" will be inserted. No sales.
Enclose clipping of this announcement with your "swap."

Have 400 Christmas seals of 1919 variety, telescope, pantograph, 17-jewel Elgin watch needs balance staff, new International oil burner for cook stove. Want radio courses, instruments, parts, etc. W. S. Moore, Box 203, Allen, Oklahoma.

Have Game-Getter ammunition and 44/40 Remington pump repeater bored for this shell. Want 16-gauge double or pump. A. Welker, 406 No. Harvey, Oak Park, Ill.

Wanted—To exchange curios, Indian relics; natural souvenirs of all descriptions. What have you? Especially want Govt. salvaged envelopes and postals. T. R. Dykes, 1117½ E. Fairview, Johnson City, Tenn.

Have auto radio, d.c. radio, 16x16 army tent, saddles, bridles, tools, aviator suits, raincoats, boots, breeches, sun lamp. Bernard Kahn, 1505 Shakespeare Ave., N. Y. City.

Have camping bag, case Cody knife, 50 German, Russian pre-war banknotes, 2 arrow heads. Swap for rifle, binoculars, camera, or? Harry Krouse, 147-10 105th Ave., Jamaica, N. Y.

Have many fine stamps. Want stamps, books, Western magazines, printing, advertising space, baseball equipment, Scott's catalog, 16 mm. movies, film. J. L. Burt, 204 South Shelby, Greenville, Mississippi.

What will you give for 50 diff. U.S. Commemoratives? Have $50 worth fine stamps for National Parks, Connecticut Tercentenary, any quantity. Burt, 204 South Shelby, Greenville, Mississippi.

Swap, good variety Australian and European stamps, lots up to 100 for any N. and S. American mixed. L. Harvey, 10 Monte St., Brighton Le Sands, N. S. Wales, Australia.

Have over 60 pieces of Indian relics. Will trade for .22 cal. Hamilton rifle, model 27, in good shape. Correspond quick. Mr. Orval Robinson, Swinton, Mo.

Exchange modern Catawba Indian curios, pipes, pots, etc., Western, other magazines, stamps, books, for precancels, stamps, coins, books, swords, arrowheads, etc. S. Watson, Route 4, Columbia, S. C.

Wanted, good General or other stamp catalog, postcards, pennants, first day or first flight covers, U.S. and foreign stamps. Have U.S. and foreign stamps, Indian pennies, guitar course, tax stamps, etc. E. Loys Futch, Route 3, Lillie, Louisiana.

Have books, Western, Detective, other magazines, modern Indian curios, stamps, arrowheads. Want coins, precancels, unpicked stamp mixtures, stone age relics. S. A. Watson, 400 Poplar, Columbia, S. C.

Wanted, to trade U.S. and foreign stamps for U.S. and colonies on catalogue basis. Send your want list and trading list. James Kennedy, Water Valley, Miss.

Three sets of erectors, will build steam shovels, cranes, etc. Complete with electric motor. Trade for typewriter in good condition. Roy Graham, Route 1, Republic, Ohio.

Have 12 double, 20 pump, 32 mid-range and full-range ammunition, also Game-Getter ammunition and pump repeater choke-bored for this

shell. A. Welker, 406 No. Harvey, Oak Park, Ill. Have 150 magazines, Western, Detective, Horror stories, Love, etc., and a 25 Stevens single rifle to trade for tenor guitar, saxophone, trumpet or what have you? Donald Saunders, Beardsley, Minn.

Genuine Sioux Indian bead-work of all kinds and relics from the Rosebud Reservation, for what have you? Enclose stamp for reply. C. L. Cordry, Box 147, Mission, So. Dakota.

Will swap a bola knife 10-in. blade, kind used in the jungles. Want pistol. L. Johnson, Aneta, N. Dak., R. 1.

Have cloth-bound books. Want U.S. stamps, etc. B. C. Campbell, 500 W. Lincoln St., Tullahoma, Tenn.

Have Indian relics. Want old violins, guns, etc. B. C. Campbell, 500 W. Lincoln, Tullahoma, Tenn.

A treatise on "How to Get Free Books" cost me $1; this and other useful information to trade for stamps or? Nat Williams, 1408 Constance St., Los Angeles, Calif.

1 Colt cap and ball pistol, caliber 31, in very good shape; 1 Remington cap and ball, 44 caliber, in very good shape; 1 pair field-glasses, in good shape; 1 vest-pocket Kodak, valued at $14, in new condition; 1 Winchester model No. 90 22WRF, in fair condition. Wanted: Hand-guns, 38 caliber or larger, or a telescope sight. E. S. Rende, 1301 W. Rush St., Phila, Pa.

Have old land grants, documents, books on Civil War, etc., to trade for good U.S. stamps. Write me. All letters answered. Roy Miller, 612 Hope Ave., Muscatine, Iowa.

For genuine Actions, send quarter's worth unused stamps. Lists also of books, magazines and miscellaneous articles to exchange for cards, stamps and coins. J. B. Brewster, Eastport, Maine.

Trade Eng. setter, female, 3 years, papers, 2 Eng. setter pups, 1 year. Want guns, Lionel train, or what? James McAndrew, 134 W. Drinker St., Dunmore, Pa.

Have 6x10 Pilot hand printing press, perfect condition, but too large for my purpose. I want a small 4x6 hand press or anything valuable. R. Gregory, Holtwood, Pa.

Want old and modern guns, swords, Indian pottery, relics, musical instruments, coins, books, paintings, plants, mtd. birds, cameras, binoculars. Have electric radio, taxidermy course, roulette wheel, etc. Stanley Lewis, 5025 Ogden Ave., Cicero, Ill.

I have guns, old and new, books, fiction and technical. Send stamp for postal swap list. Donald Lang, 409 Greeves St., Kane, Pa.

Have a dictator, a book on how to make radios, a complete book of Spanish language. Would like a guitar. C. B. Bratton, Gen. Del., Ft. Worth, Texas.

Have U.S. meters, permits, postmarks with stamp, meter and permit envelopes, foreign stamps, madstone, new lined leather gloves, size 10. Anything wanted. Harry Bovair, Wayland, Mich.

Have cello, A-1 condition, value $120. Trade for marimba; all swaps considered. Jack Russell, 315 E. Mine St., Hazleton, Penna.

Will trade New Zealand native carved wood curios for what have you? Write and tell me what you have. W. Prentice, 55 Victoria St., Hamilton, Waikato, New Zealand.

Wanted, a small gas engine or bike motor. Will swap a moving picture machine that come from a theater. Raymond Bushey, RFD No. 1, North Franklin, Conn.

Make your own duplicator, transfer fluid or secret ink. I have these and other formulas to trade for stamps or? John M. Lamberg, 1620 West Pico St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Have an eight-lesson showcard lettering course, with blanks, rulers, thumb tacks, and brush; an unmounted stamp collection of 480 foreign stamps. Want typewriter, or fountain pen. (Miss) Tillie Nichols, Box 108, R. 1, Melissa, Texas.

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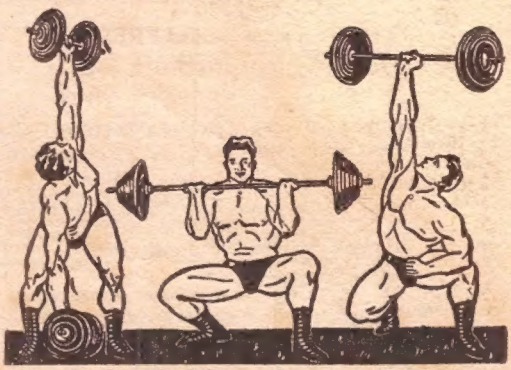

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